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Wang Shuguang

The University of Newcastle

Liu Zongying

Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, Shuguang.wang@newcastle.edu.au

Li Junyi

University of Electronic Science and Technology of China

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Hero Hua Mulan With a Thousand Faces: Why Chinese Stories Can Move the World? Evidence From a Global Cross-Cultural Interview Survey

Wang Shuguang

The University of Newcastle

Liu Zongying

Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences

Li Junyi*

University of Electronic Science and Technology of China

Abstract: While people from Western countries do not always understand of the underlying cultural values of most Chinese stories, the Hua Mulan story has gained significant recognition from Western audiences. Therefore, it would be quite beneficial if we could understand the key elements that have contributed to the success of the Hua Mulan story so that we can employ similar elements in other intercultural communication programs and promote the communication and dissemination of cultures between China and the rest of the world. According to the findings from the interviews of 6,130 respondents from 107 countries, we found that the Hua Mulan story gains global acceptance because it represents a story of “a hero with a thousand faces,” which embodies the integration of Chinese traditions and contemporary spirit through sharing a global meaning while responding to various culturally common challenges. Five key cultural value dimensions are responsible for this Chinese story’s cross-cultural affinity and influence, which helped it win recognition and empathy worldwide. The five key cultural value dimensions are loyalty and patriotism, the courage to take responsibility, compatibility of individualism and collectivism, responsiveness to the multicultural appeal, and hero growth. These dimensions are then generalized as the value identity orientation grounded in a Global Shared Meaning (GSM) in this study.

Keywords: Hua Mulan, Chinese story, cross-cultural values, GSM (Global Shared Meaning)

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* Wang Shuguang, Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, the University of Newcastle;
Liu Zongying, Institute of Sociology, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences;
Li Junyi, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Liu Zongying, Institute of Sociology, Sichuan Academic of Social Science, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610071, China. Email: Shuguang.wang@newcastle.edu.au

The international academic community widely regards cultural values as the core factors in interpreting the communication power of a global cross-cultural narrative (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Soares et al., 2006; Pergelova & Angulo-Ruiz, 2017; Stefanie, 2021). This study aims to use Hofstede and Schwartz's theoretical framework of cultural value dimensions as measuring instruments, which is widely adopted by international cross-cultural studies (For example, Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 1997, 2004, 2006; Saucier et al., 2015; Vasile & Nicolescu, 2016), to explore the influence of cultural values in the international communication of Chinese stories. Data from earlier analyses (McDonald, 1999; Sperber, 2006; Stefanie, 2021; Wang et al., 2022) and this study show that the Hua Mulan story not only has the most widespread awareness rate in the world but is also highly recognized and loved by people from different cultural backgrounds. People are so amazed that in such a few lines of the narrative poem from the folk song *Ballad of Mulan* in the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589AD), there is a story of a strange woman who fills the world with infinite imagination. This is one of the few Chinese heroine legends that, once disseminated globally, could have been expected to eventually become a modern myth that touched the world and moved everyone.

So, what are the key factors of a story that make a local narrative text like *Ballad of Mulan* so widely recognized, loved, and highly praised by audiences worldwide? Why can such a traditional Chinese cultural symbol, as a carrier of global discourse, be used in the narration of various story versions such as overseas literature, books, movies, TV shows, and stage plays without misreading or deviating from the narrative significance of the Mulan character in the original story, which represents only her country, history, culture, and ethics? Why did this local story, which has been wandering through the local culture for thousands of years, become an international icon once introduced worldwide?

In this regard, this study explores the story-focused key factors of cross-cultural affinity and influence of the local, original *Ballad of Mulan* through empirical and qualitative analysis of the value dimensions of the story's narrative to help us better understand the attraction of this character to an international audience, and thus to tell Chinese stories that embody the integration of Chinese traditions that can be shared, accepted, and recognized by the multi-cultured, global population. Also, our further aims for this study were to identify Chinese cross-cultural perspectives in seeking the master key for transcending regional concepts for enhancing external discourse systems for the international communication of Chinese stories, promoting the construction of an expanding global community aware of and sharing Chinese culture.

Study Design

We wanted to identify the main factors that contributed to the success of the dissemination of the Hua Mulan story and investigate how to improve foreigners' interests in Chinese stories if we can successfully identify and employ these factors in our narratives.

The instruments and methods for this study were based on relevant literature presenting detailed

information regarding potential measurements for our study questions and found through searching the published literature on this research (e.g., Stefanie, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). The following text summarizes the key information found through the data collection.

Based on a pilot study done overseas, we adopted the interview model for data collection to measure the value dimensions of cross-cultural communication of Chinese stories. Data was collected employing the cross-sectional sample survey design using the etic approach (Higginbotham et al., 1993, 2012), focusing on obtaining evidence on the frequency and the correlation of control variables on Chinese story information.

This study's measurement of cultural value dimensions was designed as two ways to collect data. First, as the basic strategy of quantitative data collection in the interview schedule, we used closed-ended questions to gather messages on cultural value orientations. The seven category variables of value dimensions with 40 sub-items within the Hofstede-Schwartz Model (HSM) (see Table 1), as the framework was adopted to measure the value dimension indices among the respondents. The seven sociocultural psychological orientation variables in the Hofstede-Schwartz Model reflect the main cultural dimension differences of human value views and have been supported in global studies (Triandis, 1989; Leung & Bond, 2004; Schwartz, 2006; Smith et al., 2013). Second, the interviewees were also encouraged to offer their concepts on value dimensions to extend the understanding of cross-cultural meanings of story narratives to go beyond the Hofstede-Schwartz Model. The emerging messages from the respondents' presentation, which is called "value identity orientation grounded in Global Shared Meaning (GSM)" (see Table 1), were collected through open-ended questions in the interview schedule, for example, "Please use your concept and words to explain, what elements of value in the Hua Mulan story moved you?" The post-coding strategy was conducted to analyze both the quantitative and qualitative information that was provided by the respondents regarding the GSM variable category.

We combined Cluster sampling with snowball sampling in course classes. From a total of 7,648 returned questionnaires from 126 countries, 6,136 questionnaires indicated that the respondent knew the Hua Mulan story from various media. Finally, the 6,136 questionnaires from 107 countries that met the selection criteria entered into the statistical analysis. The overall Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.81, obtained from all categories of value dimensions and each item of the interview schedule. The statistical value of construct validity of the interview schedule measured by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was 0.810 (Bartlett [χ^2] = 67.322, $P < 0.001$), indicating that the questionnaires had very high reliability and validity for the questions tested as a whole. All data were collected from 2018 to 2021 through counterparts in overseas research programs (for more information about samples and countries, see Stefanie, 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

Results of the Research

The analysis of the regression model indicates that there is significant support to answer the main research question of this study, "What kind of value dimensions enabled the Hua Mulan

story to be recognized by most respondents from many countries and become the “hero with a thousand faces” to move the world? We also applied the backward elimination method, with the statistical significance level set at 10 percent, for the explanatory variables in Model 3 to generate the final Model 4. As key points focused on Model 4, after removing the variables without statistical significance, 13 variables remained that could jointly predict 84.16 percent of the total variance in the respondents’ scores on the influence of the Hua Mulan story. All the variables and dimensions of Model 4 show significantly positive correlations. Especially among these significant positive variables, the respondents produced the six important dimensions in which the regression correlation coefficients reach the slope above 0.6 for scoring the influence power of the Hua Mulan story. These are (in order): loyalty and patriotism ($\beta = 0.827^{***}$), the courage to take responsibility ($\beta = 0.812^{***}$), compatibility of individualism and collectivism ($\beta = 0.786^{***}$), responsiveness to the multicultural value appeal ($\beta = 0.672^{***}$), and hero growth ($\beta = 0.657^{***}$). More importantly, all the above five variables are from the category of value dimension called “value identity orientation grounded in GSM.”

Also, data presented in this empirical study strongly suggested that Chinese narratives can move the world if the stories are engaged to focus on demonstrating these values with the six important dimensions in the category of GSM. Similarly, stories with such dimensions could also be widely shared and disseminated across different communities worldwide. Loyalty, patriotism, and the courage to take responsibility, as the core of cross-cultural communication, are highly emphasized by the quantitative data in the regression model analysis.

Accordingly, three other variables of dimensions, in which the regression correlation coefficient reaches the level of the slope above 0.5, are also powerful elements shown in the regression model; these are harmony, ecology, freedom, and justice in the HSM model ($\beta = 0.581^{***}$); story content ($\beta = 0.586^{***}$), media and advertising ($\beta = 0.537^{***}$) from other control variables in the category of ASS. The discussions for these three dimensions have been conducted in other relevant literature (Stefanie, 2021). The six most significant dimensions within the category of GSM will be the focus of discussions in this article.

Table 1 Regression Analysis Model of the Cross-Cultural Impact of the Chinese Story Hua Mulan

Regression analysis model of the cross-cultural impact of the Chinese story Hua Mulan ($n = 6,136$) ^[1]					
Explanatory power factors as control variables in respondent backgrounds (β)		Impact score as a dependent variable			
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
1.	Social characteristics of the population from respondents (SCPR)				
	Age	- 0.030 n.s.		- 0.112 n.s.	
	Sex (female =0)	0.078*		0.024 n.s.	
	Education	0.233**		0.332***	0.331***
	Family income	0.129*		0.076 n.s.	
2.	Seven traditional value dimensions within the Hofstede-Schwartz Model (HSM)				
	Individualism			0.417***	0.432***
	Collectivism			0.382***	0.424***

Regression analysis model of the cross-cultural impact of the Chinese story Hua Mulan ($n = 6,136$) ^[1]					
Explanatory power factors as control variables in respondent backgrounds (β)		Impact score as a dependent variable			
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Recognition for position power			- 0.072 n.s.	
	Belonging and attachment			- 0.143*	- 0.167**
	Emotional and intellectual autonomy			0.268**	0.408***
	Harmony, ecology, freedom, justice			0.525***	0.581***
	Social cynicism			- 0.025 n.s.	
3.	Value identity orientation grounded in Global Shared Meaning (GSM) ^[2]				
	Loyalty and patriotism		0.712***	0.812***	0.827***
	The courage to take responsibility		0.687***	0.802***	0.811***
	Individual-collectivism compatibility		0.522***	0.633***	0.786***
	Responding to multicultural value appeal		0.512 **	0.577***	0.672***
	Hero growth		0.503***	0.561 **	0.657***
4.	The elements from other control variables affecting the spread of stories (ASS)				
	Story content			0.592***	0.586***
	Media and advertising marketing			0.372***	0.537***
	Social promotion			0.117*	
	Friends, relatives, peer influence			0.312**	0.102*
	F	26.41**	38.97***	57.62***	84.16***
	df (Regression, residual)	(4, 6132)	(5, 6130)	(20, 6136)	(14, 6136)
	R^2	0.353	0.504	0.661	0.880
	Adjusted R^2	0.376	0.516	0.627	0.872
[1]	A number of those reported that they knew the Hua Mulan story from various media.				
[2]	The information was obtained from the respondents' wider recognition of the value characteristics of Hua Mulan stories by post-coding method to organize open-ended questions in the interview.				
β :	Slope coefficient in the regression model.				
$p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$???? n.s. means no significance					

Discussion: GSM as Key Impact Factors

In contrast to the results obtained based on seven value dimensions within the HSM as a theoretical hypothesis for cross-cultural testing research in some earlier studies (See, for example, Triandis, 1989; Leung & Bond, 2004; Schwartz, 2006; Smith et al., 2013), the findings from the regression model in this study indicate, among all variables that the impact of the Hua Mulan story on respondents, all the significantly positive correlation coefficient slope is higher than 0.6 for scoring influence power. The Hua Mulan story is focused from the five following value dimensions within the GSM values category in Model 4, which has 84.16 percent of the highest variance explanatory power.

Loyalty and Patriotism

In the case study, Burrow Russell, a graduate student in cross-cultural psychology from Australia, describes the story as follows.

“The story’s original meaning from the source of ancient Chinese culture may have emphasized the traditional concept of loyalty and filial piety. Today, however, Mulan hides her gender, takes her father’s place in the army, and faces huge sacrifices on the battlefield. It is beyond much more than family and finding herself. People like Mulan precisely because the story provides a loyal and patriotic understanding of the nation’s destiny. In Eastern and Western societies, patriotism is based on the country achieving freedom, equality, social justice, love, and happiness for all cultural values cornerstone.”

People generally tend to view the world according to the mainstream values recognized by the country where they live as residents (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 108). Therefore, the HSM could provide a framework to empirically measure and discover the value differences among different cultures to help us draw the road map of cross-cultural communication among different cultures. However, Hua Mulan’s Chinese narrative has helped us build a broad vision, focusing on global shared meanings in terms of value cognition. People from different cultural backgrounds generally agree with others in emphasizing their values at the national level, a basic trend we can see in this global sample interview analysis (Stefanie, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). As shown in the data analysis results in Table 1, even people with Western individualistic values have a positive attitude towards emphasizing Chinese traditional cultural values in the Chinese native Hua Mulan story. In other words, the messages obtained from this worldwide sample interview show that, in terms of their views on the appeal and influence of Chinese stories, such as the Hua Mulan story, which is widely known overseas, the reason why this ancient Chinese story has a strong impact on them and moves the interviewees in the first place, is the incisive interpretation and touching narration of this ancient Chinese story and the national mainstream cultural values in the lofty meaning of national destiny. Therefore, the regression analysis, with the highest correlation coefficient ($\beta = 0.827^{***}$), shows that respondents’ strong cross-cultural impact on the rock-like value beliefs of Hua Mulan’s loyalty and patriotism to their own country has become the strongest explanatory factor among all variables.

The Courage to Take Responsibility

According to the regression analysis framework in Table, the value dimension of “courage to take responsibility” is included in the variable category of GSM. The second highest positive regression correlation coefficient ($\beta = 0.811^{***}$) highlights that this dimension variable is one of the most important factors for the Mulan story’s influence among these respondents. As a character of great courage, daring to sacrifice, and taking the initiative in critical times, it is a rich concept of cultural value closely related to people’s inner sense of responsibility, moral conscience, justice, and courage, as well as firm faith. Compared with the value dimension of “harmony, ecology, freedom and justice” in

the HSM, interviewees defined Hua Mulan's story with the value dimension of "The courage to take responsibility," which has broader and richer human and moral implications. As Hansen Dimmock from Norway said:

"The reason why the film *Mulan* attracted me to watch over and over again is that it is a story about justice and courage, morality and conscience that allows a young woman to show the great character of taking on the responsibility of her country with great courage, especially in an imminent crisis, Mulan shows women's courage, conscience, tolerance, and tenacity. This is the Hua Mulan story that touched people's hearts."

The *Ballad of Mulan* originated in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534AD). The original narrative intention of the text was not the theme of "faith" and "filial piety," let alone disguising Hua Mulan as a man to win the mythology of the goddess of war. The real essence lies in eulogizing an ordinary woman, flashing a beautiful light that brings people great confidence in life in the brave face of the challenges of suffering and difficulties, and in eulogizing the natural expression of a despised official position while attaching importance to family affections, and emphasizing morality. This is why many films and television programs define contemporary people's characters to pay special attention to their responsibilities through the example of this story, to represent the pursuit of moral conscience, justice, and courage, and ignore the concept of the role of a little woman with a family as the old social identity. Kianoosh Jalali, a university student from Iran, expressed this point very well when she said:

"Hua Mulan tells a story of victory, but the touching meaning is not in the battlefield, but with the implied courage to take responsibility for moral actions. Hua Mulan's moving is not on the battlefield but behind her responsibility for a beautiful dream of peace; that is, do not hesitate to refuse the king, the emperor's reward, even if it is the emperor who bows down to her, but she also chooses to go back to her home and live with her loved ones in a serene and simple life, never to return to the battlefield."

Compatibility of Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism and collectivism, as people's different attitudes towards self-closeness in social environments and social identities, directly affect the most basic choices of our cultural values and identity tendencies and thus become the focus of global cross-cultural narratives (Triandis et al., 1995; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). All human stories contain differences in identifying the most basic cultural values of individualism and collectivism in different cultural backgrounds. For people with different cultural values, if a story can be spread across cultures among them, it must be shown the shared meaning characteristics that can be widely recognized in terms of its understanding of justice, virtue, autonomy, rationality, norms, honor, loyalty, and power from the compatibility of individual and collective relations.

Like the scripts that guide life, Hua Mulan's stories can always provide important information for the times on the new dynamic trend of value dimension orientation. As shown in the GSM variable category in the regression analysis, Hua Mulan's story emphasizes the value concept of mutual

compatibility between individualism and collectivism, completely transcends the previous view that the world is divided into two mutually exclusive cultural dimensions of individualism or collectivism, so people widely accept it and thus it becomes an important influence factor for overseas people to enhance the impact of Chinese stories ($\beta = 0.786^{***}$). The Hua Mulan story transcends the fetters of the old dual value concept structure of individualism and collectivism, which makes people see that this story has a prominent expression of the directional significance of human civilization. As Rosemary, an American respondent, said:

It is a misunderstanding to oppose individuals or collectives...The cognitive ability of current scholars is very limited, and they cannot find a more appropriate concept than individualism and collectivism to understand the concept of the integration of country, group, family, and individual embodied in the Hua Mulan story.

In today's globalized age, people are increasingly dominated by multicultural values, and the close relationships between individual thinking and collectively shared ideas impact reshaping the values of various cultures (Sullivan et al., 2016; Richmond et al., 2015). Human beings are naturally a collectivism-oriented species based on family and group. Human history is a process of exploring cooperative narratives across ethnic groups. It is the most innovative task of cross-cultural cooperation under the background of globalization to explore how to reach recognition widely among different cultures. Purely for the purpose of avoiding the barriers of different cultural values and their respective preferences and covering the global market as much as possible to gain recognition from audiences with different cultural backgrounds, the overseas producers of Mulan stories, such as Disney, have successfully developed and realized the maximum possibility of co-mingling the contradictory values of individuals and groups. Hua Mulan's narrative script reflects the compatibility of humanistic value orientations within combined individualism and collectivism. This means that humanistic orientations, in the process of globalization, will produce the emerging new concept of sharing between the increasingly inseparable individual will and collective cooperation. This also means that people are pursuing the new trend of the era, meaning humanistic value orientations that adopt the narratives of Hua Mulan's story.

Response to the Multicultural Value Appeal

The like puzzle pieces composed of the cultural values of countries in different regions of the world provide guidelines and the basis for international cross-cultural practices such as global trade, management of transnational enterprises, international education, global health promotion, geopolitics, and cross-cultural communication (Leung & Bond, 2004; Schwartz, 2006; Smith et al., 2013; Vasile & Nicolescu, 2016). Moreover, differences between cultural values are more common than consensus. Therefore, recognition and respect for differences should be the greatest consensus. It is because the difference in ethnic and cultural values is an important fact that is fundamentally difficult to shake. It also extends to the cognitive biases that form various common stereotypes among ethnic cultures, which further implies the basic view that a text written by a local culture is generally limited in cross-

cultural context (Hofstede, 2011; Venaik & Brewer, 2010; Slavka, 2012; Irawan, 2017).

However, the evidence of this study shows a different view that no matter how different people are in their orientation of cultural values, the Hua Mulan story, as a cross-cultural symbol in the context of globalization, seems to be acceptable to different cultural groups with diversified values. These groups can make various interpretations of identity. The Hua Mulan story is, therefore, like the ancient Greek and Roman myths and classic literature books that have traveled worldwide. Mulan can become a Romeo and Juliet in peoples' minds based on their cultural orientations and become the common favorite story of people from different cultural backgrounds around the world. In the category of GMS, as a variable for responding to the appeal of multicultural values, the Hua Mulan story has a very significant regression correlation coefficient ($\beta = 0.672$ ***), indicating the importance of this variable in the cross-cultural influence of Mulan's story.

Local texts need to highlight the narrative appeal of multicultural appropriateness, which is a concern in the background of globalization. This emphasizes transcending the rigid value concepts of essentialism with tribal consciousness and ethnic preference and consistently highlighting the bright side of the traditional values existing in multiculturalism; it emphasizes balancing the living contradiction and dealing with the difficult problems of life through relaxation and happy resolutions of public problems at the multicultural level. It is precise because Hua Mulan's text transcends the local tradition-solidified concept of essentialism. At the same time, it can provide a universally accepted strategy of "text conversion" for "cross-cultural coding" in the context of globalization, which determines that this story eventually becomes a cross-cultural communication text product in the selection list for the global cultural industry market (McDonald, 1999; Sullivan et al., 2016; Sperber, 2006; Stefanie, 2021). This is why Hua Mulan's story has the diversified characteristics of non-essentialism in the context of globalization, so everyone overseas has a Mulan in their hearts. As the following description illustrates:

"Mulan's personality and growth transcend the concept of local culture and has become a symbol of a diverse world" (Chile: Linda).

"Mulan is not only her own, but also her nation, and all of us both in her era and today. Whether you are Asian, Latin American, or European, all of us can see our dreams and hearts from her" (France: Susana).

"The biggest change that Hua Mulan's story has made to our understanding of China is that the stereotyped image of China in the past has been disintegrated. Chinese people with global wide recognition have always existed. Hua Mulan's story has helped us to correct our misunderstanding of China, and she can successfully change our obstacles in cross-cultural cognition. The reason is that Mulan has a heroic worldview with a thousand faces that share global meaning and speak to diverse cultures" (US: Iris).

The original intention of disseminating Mulan's story texts overseas was to create a story that could be shared with the world (Sperber, 2006). The Hua Mulan story released the concept of loyalty and filial piety and the pursuit of gender equality beyond the ancient local culture. It reflects the pursuit of a

common vision of love and peace, kindness and goodness, harmony and equality, natural integration, humility and dignity of humanity, the world's increasingly tolerant and developing attitude towards the global context of multicultural, cross-cultural communication, and the world's constant affirmation of China's positive image. All of these make Hua Mulan's story a positive contribution to the world's communication of our pursuit of good narrative thinking and construction of aesthetic cross-cultural significance.

Hero Growth

“Although there is only one Mulan story, its great charm is that it can provide mythic spiritual enlightenment for people from different cultures in the face of fateful setbacks. Hua Mulan tells the story of a hero with a thousand faces who help us face all the problems” (Germany: Hanna).

“The ordinary girl who gives people unlimited imagination, dark skin, single eyelid, witty talk, does not pressure people with heroism, but inspires people to pursue justice, love and world peace in the process of assuming the overall responsibilities and sufferings of fate, really tells us a fairy tale that everyone is looking for how to grow into a hero” (Australia: Jessica).

Mulan is about the suffering of human destiny, a bumpy life, and the exploration of the mind, and it can move people's hearts like the fairy tale of the growth of heroes. This is because the narrative of the hero's growth embodies the common psychological prototype of human subconscious pursuit of kindness and bright life meaning (Campbell, 2000, pp. 22, 41; Vogler, 2007, p. 20). Hua Mulan's story has achieved gripping narrative skills in exploring the meaning of growth amid setbacks and tribulations.

From Bruce Lee in Hollywood to Hua Mulan in Disney, the story of Chinese Kung Fu has been exploring the mode of intercultural communication of how to interpret the hero's journey of growth overseas. Ultimately, Hua Mulan's story has become a narrative thinking device for people to learn the way of a “hero with a thousand faces” to deal with life's difficulties in their cultural contexts. Moreover, it has become a variable for people to seek the growth of heroes, with a very significant regression correlation coefficient ($\beta = 0.657$ ***), showing the importance of this variable in the cross-cultural influence of the Hua Mulan story.

Conclusion

The evidence obtained from the measurement of story narrative-related cross-cultural value dimensions allows us to draw a preliminary conclusion regarding the results of our study. Facing the world, telling Chinese stories, and upgrading the power of Chinese stories for broadcasting to the world require us to draw inspiration from the cross-cultural values dimension characteristics of Hua Mulan's story that are widely recognized and shared by people all over the world. Since the discoveries from the global puzzle of human cross-cultural dimension, highlighting the wisdom

to combine traditional Chinese culture with the spirit of the times to build a community with a shared future for humanity, using loyalty and patriotism, the courage to take responsibility, the individual and collective compatibility, the responding to the appeal of multicultural values, and the value narrative of hero growth as the key value elements to win the world's wide recognition and empathy, we can form a resonance with the world and in the end, such a Chinese story will surely move the world.

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