Analysis: Mulan

Mulan is a Disney animated film that takes place in ancient China during the Sino Xiongnu War. It follows a young woman named Mulan, who disguises herself as a boy in order to take the place of her aged father during the war draft. The story is about her struggle to find her true identity and meaning in society. The film demonstrates sociological concepts such as culture, gender roles, the four stages of identity formation, and symbolic interaction perspective.

The first concept seen in the film is culture, the components that societies produce and have in common. With the setting in ancient China, a lot of the Chinese culture is represented throughout the movie. There are two types of culture shown in the film, material and nonmaterial. Material culture is things within a society that can be physically represented. In the movie, the Chinese material culture is shown through the way people dressed up in tunics and slippers and the way they ate with bowls and chopsticks. On the other hand, nonmaterial culture is non-tangible, and is represented through ideas and beliefs within a society. In the movie, one of the ways the Chinese nonmaterial culture most shown was through their religion, an example being when Mulan's father prays to the ancestors for good luck.
Another sociological principal that plays a huge part of the movie is gender roles. Gender roles are the way men and women are perceived in society. In Mulan, men are held to a higher standard. They are perceived as the dominant gender and are expected to uphold and provide for the family. Men’s superiority is shown in the movie when the general makes this idea clear and allows only men to fight in the war. Women, on the other hand, have a very different public image. In the movie women are perceived as the weaker, inferior sex. This is shown when Mulan attempts to take her father’s place in the war draft, but is declined because she is a woman. Sexism in the Chinese culture is what drives Mulan to disguise herself as a boy and fight in the war anyways.

In the film, the main character Mulan goes through several stages of identity formation, the process that all adolescents go through. Mulan goes through the four stages of foreclosure, diffusion, and achievement. Foreclosure is when one makes a commitment to a single identity based on the suggestion of people around them. Mulan goes through foreclosure toward the beginning of the movie, when she is expected to be the idealistic Chinese wife and impress the matchmaker to uphold the family honor. The next stage Mulan goes through is diffusion, which is rebelling against a previous identity. This is shown when Mulan breaks away from her family’s expectations and creates her own path as she disguises herself as a boy and fights in the war. Finally, at the very end of the movie, Mulan reaches achievement, which is finding your true identity. In the end, Mulan discovers that at heart, even as a woman, she is a true warrior. Once Mulan reaches achievement, everybody respects her for her true identity.

Furthermore, the movie demonstrates the sociological idea of symbolic interaction perspective, which is setting labels on people based on their appearance and status. In the beginning, nobody cared for what Mulan had to say because she was labeled as a helpless
woman. This label given to Mulan changed in the end when Mulan saves China and the people’s perspective of her changes from helpless woman to an honored, respectable warrior. The great change in perspective is shown when the people of China, including the emperor and general, bow down in respect to Mulan in the end of the movie.

Overall, Mulan demonstrates the effects of culture on the individual and the search to find one’s own identity. It also represents feminine power, since Mulan manages to gain respect for herself despite being labeled as an inferior woman. Eventually, through it all, Mulan changes and discovers her identity to earn a higher status from all of China.