

A Project entitled

**Critical media literacy and film discussions in secondary schools: a case study on Disney  
films**

映後討論會對於香港中學生批判媒體識讀的影響 - 迪士尼  
電影的個案研究

Submitted by

***Wang Szu Yun, Tiffany***

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## Declaration

I, *Wang Szu Yun*, declare that this research report represents my own work under the supervision of *Critical media literacy and film discussions in secondary schools: a case study on Disney films* and *Dr. CHANG Benjamin Johnson*, and that it has not been submitted previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

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Honours Project Cover Sheet

**Critical media literacy and film discussions in secondary  
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影響 - 迪士尼電影的個案研究

Name: Wang Szu Yun

Supervisor: Dr. CHANG, Benjamin Johnson

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## **Abstract**

This research uses a qualitative approach to study the possibilities of using popular culture and films to promote Critical Media Literacy with Hong Kong secondary students by analyzing social justice ideologies in Disney films. Two critical post-film watching discussions were done with two groups of students with the same gender from form one on two Disney films, the 2017 film *Beauty and the Beast* and the 1998 cartoon *Mulan*, in a Hong Kong band two secondary school. The findings show that students held positive attitudes about having film screenings and discussions, and both group's perspectives on race and gender representations on screen has either changed or being deepened. The findings suggested the need for ESL teachers to deploy popular culture and films as a resource for the development of students' critical media literacy. Film discussions act as a suitable platform for students to voice out their ideas. The need for a closer collaboration among language teachers and liberal studies teachers and the formation of critical questions for film discussions are highlighted.

## 1. Introduction

Media resources and popular culture are often considered to be a double-edged sword by school teachers and polarized attitudes towards popular culture in Hong Kong (Luk & Hui, 2017). Some think that mass media is imbued with undesirable ideologies like racism and sexism and they are not suitable for young students, while others believe that popular culture helps pupils forge meaning between their everyday life and academic studies (Buckingham, 2003). According to Cheung (2001), there is an urgent need of media education in the secondary curriculum to prepare students for generating their critical responses to mass media contents instead of accepting whatever message they receive, and several educational reforms in Hong Kong address this issue. It is true that however realistic or compelling some media images seem, they may never simply present the world, and critical media literacy has the possibility to broaden our thinking beyond the given. Although the senior secondary school English language curriculum includes “Learning English through Popular Culture”, the emphasis is mostly on how to write in a limited variety of genres (movie reviews, advice column, creating an advertisement script, etc.) (Education Bureau, 2007).

Since Hong Kong schools put more emphasis on training students’ skills on traditional literacy, I would like to argue that the training of students’ critical media literacy could be a better solution to student’s language learning. If relevant popular culture and social justice topics, such as gender stereotypes and building young people’s own identity, are invited in classrooms, both students’ traditional and critical media literacy could be trained together. Moreover, popular culture can be a useful educational tool for students as teachers can bring the relevance of the materials to students’ lives. White (1985) claims that popular culture is a valuable tool that helps young people cope with the difficult task of building and maintaining an identity. It can also influence people and youngsters who learn many social values through the media.

The study was inspired by the wide range of media consumption the secondary school students have during the student teacher's observation in her practicum. The students have varying exposure to media texts due to different family backgrounds. However, among all those media, films are more easily accessed by the students and through this entertaining activity, they may have consumed the information and values in which the movie was interpreted. Therefore, the study would probe into the possibilities in a local English class for the teacher to guide students through critical discussions about gender and race stereotypes after watching the Disney film--  
- *Beauty and the Beast*, listed in the school's screening list for the first semester of 2017/18, and another film, *Mulan* (1998), that can test students' sensitivity about cultural misrepresentations and social expectations on both female and male in its background.

## 2. Research Objectives

This research project aims to find out the possibility and effectiveness of using Disney films as a tool to enhance students' critical media literacy in Hong Kong secondary schools. Through opening up the conversation about controversial issues or different perspectives about issues students encounter in life, the research would like to discover how the discussions can turn students into more active agents in consuming media. Media education is viewed as a pivotal element in empowering secondary students through the process of media literacy and awareness formation (Tanriverdi, 2008). However, there are not enough researches done on secondary students. While many researches have been done on the Disney discourse and teaching critical media literacy, but little was done in the Hong Kong context. Disney can be viewed as a popular culture cannon and there is a lot to discuss on the topic of critical media literacy.

### 2.1. Research Questions

- (1) How might the use of Disney films in English classes enhance secondary student's media and critical literacy skills?

(2) How might student's perceptions about gender and racial stereotypes change after the discussion of the film?

### **3. Literature Review**

In the literature review, the summary will be done on how “Critical Media Literacy” was formed, and how students are benefited with more Critical Media Literacy. Moreover, there will be some examples on how teacher promotes CML in ESL classes using popular culture since media and popular culture are somehow inextricable and a good choice on popular media texts may guide students better in learning and reflect more on critical issues.

#### **3.1. Critical Media Literacy (CML)**

Critical theory promotes the examination and critiquing of the society by digging into how societies are governed. Critical media literacy is a more specific branch that includes media and popular culture. CML is defined as, “a pedagogy that positions students to analyze relations among media, audiences, information, and power to produce alternative media texts that challenge messages in dominant discourse” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 62). What is more, CML encourages viewers to draw “on their cultural resources and life experience as they deconstruct, debate, resist and reimagine dominant narratives” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 63). Through analyzing the crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, students can learn about how power, media, and information are linked.

Kellner and Share (2007) used the metaphor of an iceberg to explain CML. Many students can analyze the obviously exposed iceberg. However, CML provides them a chance to learn about the entire iceberg. This allows students to learn about not only the visible aspects of Disney films but also the “ideological notions of white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy, and other



oppressive forces” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p.8). They also believe that CML can help create good citizens and motivated participants in social life (Kellner & Share, 2005, p.372). This framework helps students gain power over media texts and they can produce personal meanings and identities from media interpretations. By becoming active agents, they can deconstruct injustices and create a better society.

### **3.2. Critical Media Literacy and Popular Culture**

In fact, popular culture and teaching critical media literacy are often drawn together in researches because according to Larson and Marsh, popular culture is what children and adolescents engage with most outside of the academic curriculum (2005). It has an immediate reflection in human language, and due to, youngsters are motivated by the film, television programs, computer games, music videos from various cultures in different levels. They are exposed to popular culture every day, but what they comprehend about the world is not decontextualized and guided.

During their media consumption of popular culture, it is easy for them to make unconscious decisions or gain the mindset of what the media producers want them to think. However, the popular cultural contexts are often excluded from the official school curriculum, and students are restricted to study the traditional literacy forms. This is reasonable, but teachers nowadays should teach about the sometimes-stereotyped images and illustrations in the media and fill the gap between how the students think and what the media illustrates.

### **3.3. Why do students need Critical Media Literacy?**

There are various modes of media that convey social and cultural issues, and critical media literacy stands a great role in helping students converge with this ever-changing informative world (Yuen, 2010). According to the definition given by United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization ("UNESCO"), "media education" enables people to understand media used in their society and they may acquire skills to use them to communicate with others. They would learn how to critically reflect upon media texts, interpret the messages and select appropriate media for making their own stories to connect with their own audience (2008).

Although the young are increasingly being able to use the new forms of communication with ease, they do not necessarily have the ability to analyze and evaluate the media messages. By analyzing the messages beyond the words about power relationships, people can think critically about the author's ideas about the society's norms, such as racial and gender inequality and it is a meaning-making process for the literate learner to draw upon.

### **3.4. Disney films and Critical Media Literacy**

In fact, secondary students in Hong Kong are required to learn how to respond to several genres, but it is to many scholar's concern that it is too controlled, and students may not benefit from it much. A film is a common genre for secondary students and a tool easy for teachers to start a conversation with students, especially Disney films, which are materials closer with ESL students. However, children may incessantly receive and consume Disney's way of interpretations of gender roles and behaviors as well as some of the race representations without having doubts about them.

Throughout the years, the stereotyped characters and predictable plots in the Disney discourse have received innumerable criticisms. Wormer and Juby's research on cultural representations in Walt Disney films dealt with images of race, sex, ethnicity, and consumerism in contemporary Disney films; a through mutual examination was done on multicultural images such as *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Princess and the Frog*, and they critiqued much

on racialized and sexualized representations in children's film (2015). In fact, many people believe that due to Disney's unwavering influence on children's imagination, they should ensure that their films are free of gender stereotypes and racial and religious discrimination. Facing this dilemma, the company has been changing the contexts with many more social issues to reflect on the changing society. However, teachers' and parents' guidance are also essential. Teenagers need to be guided critically in film screening so that they are aware having a critical mindset when consuming media texts on their own.

This research took reference from a critical media literacy project done in TWGHs Mr. and Mrs. Kwong Sik Kwan College in 2005. Before the project was launched, the researchers agreed that there was no well-established tradition of critiquing in language teaching (Wong, Chan, & Firkins, 2006). Therefore, they developed a critical literacy program for the secondary school students. One interesting example was that they included *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie as the theme, and students had to analyze the film *Peter Pan* (2003) by Columbia Pictures, and the cartoon *Peter Pan* (1953) by Disney Pictures. The decoding of the media was successful in activities like rewriting the story from Captain Hook's perspective. Students had to identify the major theme and what the author wanted to convey in the story. The morality and gender roles assigned by the characters were also pondered upon and discussed within classes.

The model they used for analyzing the lessons was the Four Resources Model of Literacy, and so the students had to take on four reader roles i.e. code-breaker, text-participant, text-user, and text-analyst when interacting with the films (Freebody and Luke, 1990). These roles enable them to "break the code," "participate in understanding and composing," "use texts functionally," and "critically analyze and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral" (Freebody and Luke, 1990).

## **4. Methodology**

In order to answer the research questions, the research was done at the researcher's field experience school. In this research project, the qualitative method was chosen to examine the effectiveness of movie discussions before and after film screening and student's perspective of having these movie discussions in English classes.

### **4.1. Setting**

The research was conducted in a local secondary school in Hong Kong. It is a mixed-sex band two secondary school located in a middle socio-economic status area in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Although the medium of instruction in the school for English lessons is English, most students need teachers support in Chinese. There are three types of English lessons in the school curriculum (English/ English Oral/ Life-wide English) that provides students with a language-rich environment. Students would watch English movies in Life English as well as on Movie day, especially planned for lower level students. Promoting students' learner autonomy and discovering their potentials by using IT materials was one of the major concerns for the school development plan. Therefore, teachers in this school were trying to employ different e-learning strategies with different media.

### **4.2. Participants**

Students in the class that I taught in my field experience semester were invited to participate in my research. Six students, three girls, and three boys, who have more experience watching Disney films were selected from the volunteers. Most importantly, students with poorer academic performances were prioritized to see how films and popular culture can help those students in being more motivated in learning English or being a more proactive critical thinker in life. Purposive sampling was used so that the selected sample would meet the purpose of the study for it is a single-case research.

### **4.3. Qualitative method – Focus Group**

A focus group was conducted in this research. The advantage of using the focus group method was it provides the opportunity to analyze the strength with which an individual holds an opinion (Morgan, 1997). If they were presented with opposing opinions or directly challenged, the individual may either modify their position or defend it. Bringing together all the comments that an individual had made can enable the researcher to determine whether their view changes in the course of discussion; this was the goal of this study.

### **4.4. Data Analysis Method**

Critical discourse analysis was used as the data analysis method. It is a problem-oriented set of method that first involved analysis of public speeches. Researchers use them in educational studies analyzing teacher and students' uses of language (Rogers & Mosley, 2008). The transcripts of the discussions as well as the drawing/ writings of students were analyzed through this framework and the mutual and distinct topics or phrases of their speeches were picked out.

### **4.5. Project Design**

Two groups of three students with the same gender with the ages of 11 or 12 were recruited for the film discussions. Each group went through both of the two separate focus group discussions. It was conducted in this way for the students of the same gender to feel comfortable directing the conversation as a group.

#### ***Focus group one***

The first focus group served as a starter for the students to be accustomed to voicing out their views; it allowed for a more general discussion of Disney and their broad opinions of Disney

films. The participants' response provided me some knowledge about their Disney film experience and how much have they engagement they have with Disney characters and Disney-fied stories. The questions are attached in the Appendix. This focus group was intended to explore how much understanding the participants had with female and male characters as well as evaluate their critical thinking during their engagement with media.

### ***Focus group two***

The second focus group comprised several short 5-minute clips of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Mulan* (1998). Semi-structured questions were prepared for the students. Especially for the *Mulan* clip, different clips that related to their gender representations were shown to the two groups; one was about masculinity while the other was on the social expectations on women in China at that period. At the end of this focus group, a task that invited creative responses was designed to let students brainstorm about how they would change a scene in any Disney film they think was worth changing.

The researcher's role in the discussion was to guide her students towards a deeper analysis of the way characters with different genders and culture was portrayed in the film. Therefore, *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), as well as *Mulan* (1998), were chosen due to the relatability to her students, especially when the first one was recently watched by them on Movie Day. In fact, films work to create culturally-produced notions of femininity and masculinity; it is a key source of idealized images and interpretations of men and women (Stacey, 1994).

For example, in the live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast*, some argue that Belle was made more feminist compared the cartoon version, with the fact that Belle wore more practical clothing and became an inventor of her own; however, since *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) was a retell of the 1991 animation by Walt Disney Pictures, most elements remained the same, and

it is to be argued that students might not be aware of the reasons behind how the male and female characters were portrayed in a particular way. Moreover, the recent controversial about the film was about the homosexual scene in the end of the film. Therefore, the students were shown short clips of the film and discuss their opinions about the scene.

The questioning of the film was highly emphasized and linked with the semi-structured questions with references to the Four Resources Model (Freebody and Luke, 1990). Interactions and the joint construction of meaning among the participants and the teacher were closely observed. I tried to provide a relatively free rein to the discussion.

## **5. Findings**

The goal of this research was to open a discussion about ideologies that can be noted in Disney films in a local secondary school. Two themes, gender stereotypes and cultural representations, in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan* were touched upon in the focus groups.

### **5.1. Students' perspective on using Disney films as a tool to enhance critical media literacy**

In the first discussion of each group, both female and male students welcomed the idea of having Disney films as the content of English lessons. However, it came to my concern that despite the films were viewed with Chinese subtitles, the film discussion would be only applicable and effective if the medium was in Cantonese, after receiving several requests from students on the switch of language from English to their mother tongue. Therefore, I directly started the whole discussion in Cantonese with some Mandarin, the researcher's first language, as support for further clarification.

To start with, both participants in the boy and girl group claimed that they have watched Disney films when they were in kindergarten and primary school. Most of them stopped in the third or fourth year in primary school because they think it would be too “childish” if they continued. Yet, only two of the male participants remarked that they continue to watch Disney films even till now. One stated that he likes *Inside Out* (2015), while the other voiced his particular preference for *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012). The rest of the students think that Disney movies are “boring” and “stupid”. In fact, many popular motion pictures are made by Walt Disney Animation Studios, such as *Zootopia* (2016) and *Frozen* (2013), and even more are produced by Pixar. I believe that the students are just not aware of the fact that they have actually watched more Disney films than they can imagine.

We then continued to the participants’ likes and dislikes for particular Disney characters. It was out of my expectation that both groups dislike the earlier princess animations of Disney, such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. As for *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), the boy group expressed their strong dislike of the “ugly and brutal” Beast (Boy A), as well as the “creepy” storyline (Boy B).

**Boy A:** 「很醜又很暴力啊。」(*The Beast is ugly and brutal.*)

**Boy B:** 「*Beauty and the Beast* 故事很變態啊，為了一枝花，抓了女主角還抓了他爸爸。」(*The story is sick and insane because the Beast locked Belle and her father up for the rose.*)

The boy group additionally mentioned that they think the female body image in Disney films are displayed with skinny waists and even small feet. They find it unnatural. However, Boy B mentioned even more of his views on the pretty image.



**Boy B:** 「我小學的女生說少女時代也比他們那些好啊。」(*My friends in primary school thought Girls Generation is better than Disney Princesses.*)

「你覺得我們是不是需要多一點男主角為主的迪士尼電影？」(*Do you think we need more male main character Disney movies?*)

**Boy B:** 「沒所謂阿，漂亮就行。」(*It's okay as long as the characters are pretty.*)

It can be seen that Boy B was thinking in a more holistic manner. He believes that as long as the characters are pretty and representable, those movies will attract him the most. This comes to a question as he mentioned Girls Generation: “Are the K-pop stars the new role model for students of this age?” According to my observation during the field experience, most of my female students loved Korean pop stars, and most of them wanted to have as “perfect” and “attractive” body figures as the stars. Some are overly conscious about their bodies and the way they dress.

In terms of students’ attitude towards these critical film discussions, both groups held a rather positive attitude as they indicated that movie-watching not only strengthens their impression of the learning content but also relieves their study stress. However, Boy A and Girl C mentioned how they cannot understand the English movies, and so they hope to have film discussions. Boy C also recommended that he likes Marvel movies more than Disney films.

**Boy B:** 「電影一定要看的！可以看那些片放鬆一下嘛。」(*Watching movie is relaxing.*)

**Boy A:** 「最好有老師來跟我們講一下，因為我聽不懂。」(*I want a teacher talking to us after the movie because I don't understand.*)

**Boy C:** 「最好播 *Marvel* 的電影。」(*I love Marvel better.*)

For the girl group, there were also several points worthy to be discussed upon. Firstly, the girls think the happy endings in Disney movies are too unrealistic. They prefer more realistic movies that they can relate to in life. This is a good critical observation from the girls as the fairy tales are usually Disneyfied for the sake of favoring the market (Bryman, 2004). Happy endings are normally essential in stories and films for youngsters. This can show that the girls actually have some summarizing skills and if their critical media literacy skills can be trained well if more media resources are brought in the classroom and being discussed.

Secondly, Girl B's reply, 「花木蘭是雜種」 (*Mulan is a crossbreed/ bastard*), alerted me when I asked them whether they know if Mulan is a Chinese princess. Her wordings startled me, and I had to correct her words immediately. In fact, it came to my notice that teenagers in this age tend to misuse words or use bad words when describing things and people (Mercury, 1995). To my acknowledgment, this girl was actually the monitress in the class and she was proud of her status so sometimes she can be a little bossy and she often gets to voice out more in class. However, she was involved in several bully incidents in her first year of secondary school and her relationship with some of the girls was not that peaceful.

## **5.2. “Voicing out my view” -- Gender and racial stereotypes in Disney films**

In the second focus group, it was obvious that students' perceptions about gender and cultural misrepresentation were deepened after the discussion. They tried to think in a more critical way and also managed to articulate more. According to the Four Resources Model of Literacy, the

students took on roles as code-breaker, text-participant, and text-analyst when interacting with the clips. They broke the codes of the clips, participated in the meaning, and also were able to grasp the ideology behind the videos` by understanding that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral (Freebody and Luke, 1990).

At first, for the *Beauty and the Beast* section, both groups only talked about how “ugly” the Beast was or how LeFou looked like a lunatic. However, after I started to give out hints to guide them in noticing the characters’ clothing, skin color, the way they act as well as the lyrics in the scenes, both groups learned how to use adjective and phrases like “brutal”, “masculine”, “selfish”. I also introduced ideologies like feminism and masculinity and tested their knowledge by asking them to describe the terms. Along the progress, the participants began to realize that character portrayal are actually constructed with social and cultural meanings and the power dynamic behind can sometimes be intense. For example, girl B mentioned that “*Asian characters may often look less powerful in the Western context*” and boy C indicated that “*The Huns look very evil and non-human like in the movie. I think Disney always make the villains ugly.*”

During the discussion, I have observed that some students know what “feminism”, “masculinity” and “patriarchy” meant while one of the male students have not heard of the terms before. Especially for this student, while we were discussing the vague gay moment in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), he quoted that it was odd for me to suddenly talk about gay rights and LGBTQ issues, and I will talk about my reflection on this in the next section. In addition to this, students’ feedback about the “gay scene” reached a consensus that they think it is very unobvious, and they hoped that Disney could have included homosexual characters in their stories earlier. One of the girls also said that “*we should take care of people's different needs and all of them should be given a chance to have a voice in the media*”. By having this interaction, the participants in

both groups had a deeper realization about the shades of grey in social issues and how it is important for people to be empathic and to not take everything for granted.

Finally, we watched the part in *Mulan* (1998) when she was getting dressed up to prepare for her first meet with the matchmaker. We focused on the misrepresentation of Mulan; the dress and makeup looked more Japanese rather than Chinese. The girls also chatted about the Confucian moral expectations for women at that time, and whether people still expect women to follow the virtues these days. Girl C indicated that if *Mulan* is going to be made into the live-action version, more modern Asian values should be added. “*Mulan is kind and smart, however, the lyrics in the song discriminates women*”, she said. To sum up, before the second focus group, student’s understanding of how different gender and race are portrayed in media was on the surface level. After the discussion, they have explored the misrepresentations in both areas and how the power structures work in both Disney films.

Students’ final reflection at the end of the examination shows that they have had a deeper scrutiny of the scenes in *Beauty and the Beast* as well as *Mulan*. In the following, I will be demonstrating the students’ work and show how they have improved their critical thinking. Since we ended with *Mulan*, it was less of a coincidence that all students decided to twist the plot in the film for this task. A translation was provided for each piece.

Girl A:

如果花木蘭拍真人版,我希望可以試女權男悲呢結而說明為何要男女平等  
花木蘭在動畫裡面是穿很像日本裝的服裝,如果真人版可以穿得<sup>果</sup>像回中國傳  
統的衣服。那就更好,因為我以前以為花木蘭是日本出的

*(If I make the live-action version of Mulan, I would want to try a more Feminist ending to*

show the importance of **gender equality**. Mulan wears a Japanese style clothing in the animations and if she could wear a more **traditional Chinese clothing**, it would be better because before the discussion **I thought Mulan was from Japan.**)

Girl B:

如果拍真人版的 ~~的~~ 花木蘭，我會覺得要男女  
平等，男人要~~要~~做到 / 可以做的事情女人都可以做。  
~~不需要~~ 不需要太古版，~~好~~  
~~好~~ 可以多元化 d

(If there will be a live-version Mulan movie in the future, I think **boys and girls should be treated equal and women can do what men can do. Do not need to be too old-fashioned.**  
Can be more diverse.)

Girl C:

女孩子不用太保守。  
能夠開放一點。  
男女平等。

(Girls do not have to be too preservative.

To **be more open.**

**Gender equality.**

加入一些現代的禮儀。

Add some **modern etiquette.**

之前的禮儀管得比較嚴謹。  
服裝能穿比較代表中國的衣服。

The etiquettes were more rigorous. The characters could wear **clothes that represent China.** )

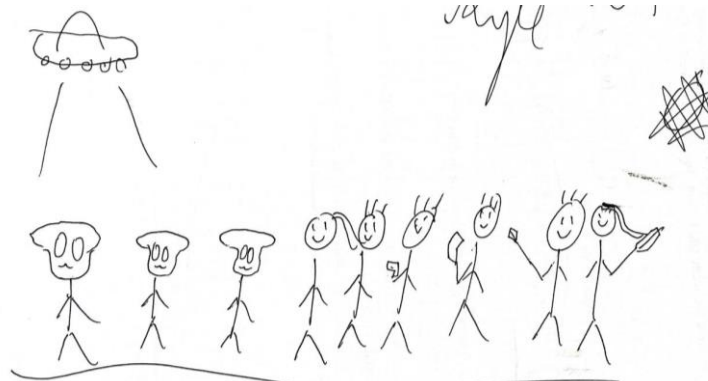
The above pieces are writings from the girl group. All of them mentioned about their urge of having the new live-action Mulan movie with more gender equality and more Chinese essence.

The bottom two indicated that they would like to add some modern in the storyline such as new

virtues for Mulan. The writing in the top even mentioned that she wants the Mulan movie to be more feminism, although she did not state how she could make that happen.

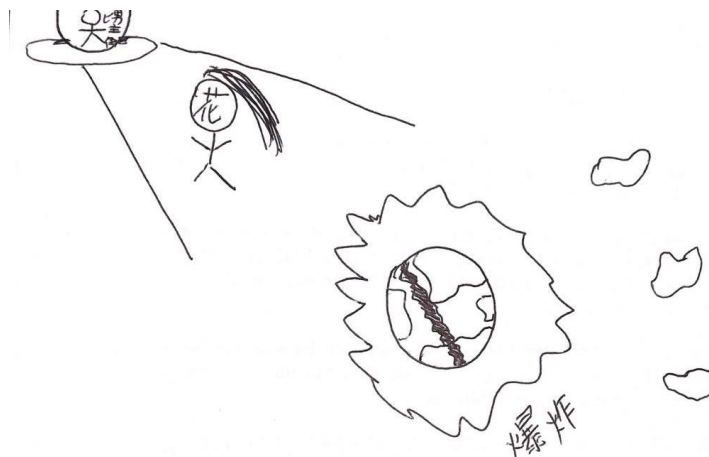
In comparison to the girls' works, the boys preferred to draw out their new *Mulan* movie. Looking at the drawings shown below, two of the students made Mulan meet aliens and one explained that since in the future, the Earth will be less and less fertile, people will be moving to the outer space. Therefore, he wants Mulan to be moving to the moon for a happier future. In fact, I was surprised to see these students being able to articulate their ideas with supportive reasons at the end of the discussion. They were able to engage critically with the lyrics and Mulan's image and to re-evaluate their positions over time.

Boy A:



*(When Earth explodes, the aliens will come and pick us up to board the spaceship. )*

Boy B:



## **6. Discussion and implications**

In this section, I would analyze and reflect on the participants' feedback on racism and sexism in the Disney films that were covered. Further on, I would raise my opinions on how teachers in Hong Kong could implement this kind of film discussions in secondary schools.

### **6.1. Students are aware of sexism and racism, yet they need help to rationalize their ideas**

After the second discussion with both groups, I was surprised to see the students were more expressive compared to their performance in English lessons. They were able to articulate their ideas with supportive reasons after identifying the social factors of race and gender that were often misused as tools for power at the end of the discussion. Through analyzing the lyrics and the main character's image in films, we re-evaluated our position as Asian audiences of the Disney movies on the messages that the movies wanted to convey.

In terms of their change of views on sexism, I would like to bring up the "body image" example in the second discussion from both groups. Both female and some male participants expressed their preference for the perfect and fit body images in popular media. Although they knew that the princesses' physical appearances look unnatural and too skinny, in real life, there is still a stereotypical concept of beauty. Therefore, I hope to share with them that media texts that seem realistic can also be socially-constructed.

During the "gay" scene discussion, one of the male students queried why I suddenly brought up LGBTQ issues. Reflecting on this, I believe that I could have done a more coherent transition rather than jumping right into the gay scene since according to my acknowledgment, most junior secondary school students would not have learnt about the different gender orientations

at school. In seeing this, I believe that it is important for secondary students to have enough exposure to a variety of social issues with teachers' support, so they are imperceptibly influenced to developing a good habit of reading the news and showing care to the society as good citizens (Kellner & Share, 2005, p.372).

As for the talk on *Mulan*, I discovered that the students were not that conscious about the misrepresentation of Mulan, a character in Chinese history, in this Western version story. After analyzing on the clothing of Mulan, two of the girls told me that they thought Mulan was from Japan. The only girl, girl B, who knew that Mulan was from China claimed the character as a "crossbreed". The misuse of language and mistook of the story background strengthened my idea of implementing film discussions and using popular culture to guide students to a more accurate interpretation of media texts. Being able to use words wisely in different situations is also one of the goals for students. By drawing on student's cultural resources and life experience, these discussions will help them deconstruct their previous impression on personal or social issues and learn the social dynamics in concrete scenarios in films (Kellner & Share, 2005).

## **6.2. Implications for Hong Kong teachers**

From the findings, it is observed that the students have the capacity to appreciate changing perspectives. Well-designed critical film discussions promoting social justice would be a potential and beneficial platform for Hong Kong secondary school students. Not only can they learn how to interact with and critique media texts, pupils can also produce their identity as a global citizen and make wiser decisions when consuming popular media. For instance, based on the sampled works, I could further guide students in writing full paragraphs on racism or sexism, which could train student's traditional literacy at the same time. Depending on the content of the movie, language teachers and liberal studies teachers could also design an



interdisciplinary project with the students.

With the help of popular culture, we know from the dialogues that students feel less stressed in studying. Since the films may seem less academic, the discussions may be a platform where students build their confidence in articulating their ideas. They can also gain a more well-rounded understanding of various social expectations, power dynamics, and their peers' ideas through films and popular culture.

As a future teacher, when it comes to choosing the teaching content, we should base it on students' feedback in formative assessments to frame meaningful learning goals for students after the discussions. Moreover, the students can also take part in choosing the films with the emphasis on learner autonomy. Building a safe and respectful environment in these kinds of discussions is also crucial, especially if controversial issues will be touched upon. As for the question types that the teacher should prepare for a critical media literacy lesson or how teachers could implement critical film discussions in the exam-oriented based curriculum are aspects that can be further explored in the future in different contexts.

## **7. Limitations of the research**

There are several limitations of this research. First of all, the limited participants make it difficult for the study to be fully reliable. Since this is a case study on a specific school in Hong Kong, the findings may vary among different learners in Hong Kong. The second limitation is that a real media literacy class could be done during the data collection so more challenges could be found through action research. However, due to the limitation of time and the school's packed schedule, unfortunately, this could not be further arranged. The third limitation is that after the focus group, another part for individual interviews could be added, so the students might feel more comfortable in expressing themselves about the controversial gay scene or

anything they would like to add about the focus groups. This could also make up for the short speaking time for each person when they are in a group. Finally, since the participants of the focus groups were the researcher's previous students, there is potential bias for the students to be giving conventionally correct answers instead of revealing their own ideas (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

## **8. Conclusion**

In this research, we can conclude that Disney films acted as an appropriate medium for students to have a quick exploration of the issues in gender and culture representations in the media. Through engaging with the clips and the guidance of the questions, students were able to express themselves about gender and cultural representation issues that they might have never thought about before. By opening up this conversation, the student-teacher relationship became closer and the effectiveness of the film discussion was found in their speech as well as their final work.

In fact, with the media's crucial role in this globalized world, it is difficult for parents or teachers to always be filtering the information that the youngsters and teenagers receive. Therefore, teachers should take up parts of the responsibility to train students' critical media literacy towards the pervading influences that may possibly shape a part of the adolescents' identity as a global citizen. Movies, social media, and video games are in the teenagers' everyday life and they all have a strong influence on how people see the world.

By focusing on critical media literacy, there is potential that students' awareness and ability to critically analyze the relationships between media and audiences, and information and power would be heightened through the integration of popular culture content in film discussions with linkage to academic topics in subjects like liberal studies and English. Through films, the most

accessible and teachable media text in school, teachers can lead students to a stronger understanding of how different representations in media play to our preferences and beliefs and enhance the student-teacher relationship through facilitating more dialogues with pupils.

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## 10. Appendix

### Project Design

There will be two groups of voluntary students, with three boys and three girls in each group. The whole data collection consists of two 30-to-40-minute discussions. The teacher will be using Chinese and English when delivering the question. However, students can use either Cantonese or English to answer in their preference.

### **First Discussion**

1. I will start with asking the students some preference questions, from a wider range about Disney and their products, to focused ones on Disney films.
  - a. What comes to mind when you think about Disney films?
  - b. What do you like about Disney?
  - c. Is there anything you don't like about Disney?
  - d. What is your favourite Disney movie and why?
  - e. Is there a Disney movie that you don't like? Why?
2. Then, I will ask students about their favourite Disney female and male characters to observe whether the students have awareness about how the female and male gender roles are presented in films.
  - a. Tell me about your favourite Disney female and male character. Why are they your favourite?
  - b. Why do you think so many girls like Disney princesses?
  - c. How would you describe Disney princesses (physically)? Do any of them look like you and your friends?
  - d. How could you describe the behaviours of the Disney princesses? Can you use adjectives to describe them?
  - e. Can you use three adjectives to describe the male characters in Disney films? Why do you think they are represented this way?
  - f. Do you think we have many Disney prince movies or films with males as characters? Why do you think so?
  - g. Is it interesting to have popular culture discussions in English lessons?

## Second Discussion

In this discussion, the teacher will show the students some clips from two Disney films: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Mulan* (1998). In groups, the volunteers will discuss among themselves with guidance from the teacher about the different gender representations and their opinions. Extra questions are prepared in case the participants have more to express.

### 1. "Belle" Clip - Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMzet0pZmW4> (0:00:00-0:05:49)

- a. 0:05:39, the lyrics goes "she really is a funny girl", why do you think the villagers think Belle is funny? Do you think Belle is funny? 你覺得貝爾跟小鎮裡的人有沒有什麼不同? 你覺得她奇怪嗎?
- b. Why is she different? 她不同或獨特的地方在哪裡?
- c. Do you think we still think girls who read are weird? 你覺得現在大家還會覺得喜歡讀書的女孩子很奇怪嗎?
- d. Are the three girls in 0:04:59 different from Belle? 那的三個女生跟貝爾不同嗎? 有什麼不同?

### 2. "Gaston" Clip - Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) (46 seconds)

[https://youtu.be/1JG6f5\\_37tg](https://youtu.be/1JG6f5_37tg)

- a. What kind of man do you think Gaston is? Can you use adjectives to describe him?

### 3. Choose the adjectives that describes the two characters.

- a. Belle: 聰明 smart, 溫柔 gentle, 柔弱 delicate, 獨立 independent
- b. Gaston: 自私 selfish, 英勇 heroic, 有男子氣概的 manly, 佔有慾強的 possessive

### 4. "Gay" scene: Is there something strange about the scene?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biY-L-x8cuU> (0:25-28)

- a. What do you feel about this scene? 你覺得這裡怎麼樣?
- b. Is there anything wrong with this scene? 有沒有什麼奇怪的地方?
- c. Do you follow news about LGBTQ issues in the news? 你平時有關注一些同志議題嗎?

### 5. *Mulan* (1998) -- for the boy group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFU>

[KgQKqDMU&t=3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFU) (0:03:30)

- a. What were the characters doing?

- b. Do men need to be muscular?
  - c. 男性一定要強剛，男兒有淚不輕彈。說說你對這兩句的看法。
6. Mulan and the matchmaker -- for the girl group  
<https://youtu.be/r73KRT6f10A>
7. Finally, I will ask the students to do the final task and ask them some ending questions.
- a. Write a short paragraph or draw a scene that you would like to change in one of the clips that we have watched/ a scene of a Disney film that comes up in your mind. Describe the scene and reason. You can use Chinese or English. (5-8 mins)

#### Extra questions for the final task

1. 這些電影都是用誰的視角拍的？
2. 你覺得如果要把故事改編你會怎麼改？ex. 外貌/男女主角對調
3. 花木蘭要翻拍真人版，你覺得怎樣會改得更好？
4. 寫一小篇短文說說你會想改的一部迪士尼電影情節，並說明為什麼。可以連結自身的理由，畫出來並說為什麼。
5. 有什麼社會議題可以加入到電影中？
6. Do you like how the women are portrayed in the films? Do you like how the men are portrayed in the films? Why?
7. What kind of audience do you think these films are made for? Be specific. What kind of effect can the films make on the audience?