A Brief Comparison of Disney and Ghibli

From early black-white Mickey Mouse series produced by Disney to classical Mononoke of Miyazaki’s Ghibli, animation, as one of powerful and influential artistic expressions, does not serve people merely in terms of amusement. In last twenty years, however, accompanying with the rapid development of animation as one essential fields of culture industry, the importance of soft power has been popularized and refined by many countries. Also, the scope of audiences of animation has extended and broadened. Not only children but also adults find varieties of animations or Japanese manga books very attractive. However, in fact animated films producers leaded by Disney and Ghibli construct and reinforce people’s perspective with their delivering underlying messages subconsciously. Unlike Disney’s American background and long history, Ghibli is a comparatively young energetic Japanese corporation founded by Hayao Miyazaki in 1985. In addition, Disney and Ghibli differ greatly in their adoption of scripts, values and perceptions of delivering messages and handling with feminism. It has being said that issue of feminism has been raised in the United States, which is considered as American’s proud and strong perspectives. But ironically and conversely, this issue has been displayed more in Ghibli’s animations rather than in Disney’s. Disney and Ghibli are dissimilar in ways and contents of delivering underlying messages in their productions.

Disney was first created by Walt Disney in 1923. In spite of its original Mickey Mouse series, most of Disney’s later animations were derived from fairy tales, such as well-known “Snow White” and “Cinderella”. Yet by portraying designated fairy tales which basically are truths like ancient and anonymous ones, Walt Disney’s norms overwhelm and overweigh the nature of messages inside the fairy tale itself. Disney imbues young audience with special
political agenda secretly. Wuefel claims that, “historically, the purpose of fairy tales was to indoctrinate children with cultural specific believe system, and not simply to entertain they” (1). Compared with original fairy tales, Disney tends to be more prudish and sterilized for achieving its educational role in young teenagers. Furthermore, dominant traditional American values and underlying US ideology such as capitalism are not invisible in Disney’s products. For instance, in Disney’s animation *Aladdin*, several offensive stereotypical factors were noticed and criticized, on its racial lyrics of the opening song “Arabian Nights”, which maintains “It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” even after being revised (Sherman1). Besides the racial exclusiveness, Disney animations also have negative influences on audiences in terms of gender roles. According to Sherman, gender roles are the qualities and characteristics that are considered inherently feminine or masculine and gender stereotypes of women are passive who stay at home to serve men (3). Disney’s setting of actress in its animations is always inclining to passive heroine who born in a timeless society with divine hierarchy and rewards of power and of fame, such as Snow white or Cinderella. Typically, women are shown as in a position of princess, queen, or homemaker, who being subservient to male characters or traded by men while men basically play strong, powerful roles. It is commented by Sherman that women are traded as commodity in a typical patriarchal society (3). Such underlying gender stereotypes that men are forceful actor while women are inferior submissive could have a deep impact on children when they watch Disney.

On the contrary, Ghibli, a Japanese studio founded by Hayao Miyazaki in 1985, which is almost 60 years later than Disney carries its stories with a different perspective. Unlike most Disney animations adapted from old fairy tales, every single story in Ghibli films was created by Miyazaki himself and his workmates. Miyazaki admits that his films are all made without a
script and explains, “I don’t have the story finished and ready when we start work on a film. The story develops when I start drawing storyboards. It’s a dangerous way to make an animation film and I would like it to be different. (Interview1)” That is why most of the main characters are ordinary and normal in Ghibli’s original stories instead of those who born with royal blood or in extremely wealthy family portrayed in Disney’s animations. In addition, Ghibli also maintains different values and perspectives in its films compared to Disney. It focuses more on personal achievement and expresses a sense of positivity, hope and belief in the goodness of humanity. One example is “my neighbor Totoro”, in which gigantic Totoro plays as a conjurer of fantasy forest who help out two little girls kindly and lovably in the film and the animation shows a harmony or a wish of a harmony relationship between humans and nature. Whereas Disney is trying to indoctrinate children with traditional American values and stereotypical gender perspectives, Ghibli display total different ideas in terms of Feminism. To some extent, Ghibli’s way to comprehend and display a strong conception of feminism has personal connection to Miyazaki. Miyazaki confesses that in his opinion women are more adorable and admirable because actually they are stronger than male heroes (Interview1). Ghibli’s heroines are often more active, less resourceful, loyal, or honesty adolescents while Disney’s main female roles are passively suffering hardship and ending up at getting their so-called true love. It is pointed out that Snow White keeps being passive throughout the drama with her passive mantra “One Day My Prince Will Come” whereas San fights after Ashitaka with a knife in Spirited Away of Ghibli (Taylor and Goldsmith 6). Even though femininity is a particular essential subject for each company’s films, the interpretations of feminism are dissimilar in Ghibli’s and Disney’s animations respectively.

To sum up, animations of Disney and Ghibli provide potential information with disparate
forms and substances respectively. Disney and Ghibli are different in each ways of making stories, portrayal of respective main values and feminism generally. Disney, with predominant resources of fairy tales, subtly delivers American values and some stereotypes of gender in its works. Conversely, Ghibli portrays original stories with positive perspectives of human and nature and active, energetic female characters or heroines in its animation. Understanding the similarities and differences of Disney and Ghibli could assist audiences to choose appropriate products of animation.
Works Cited

http://www.midnighteyes.com/interviews/hayao_miyazaki.shtml

