

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Representation is an important aspect that can affect social educations that is being presented to the society. According to Stuart Hall (1997) representation is how the media represents issues, happenings, kinds of people, and circumstances which brought the notion of meaning into a new light. This can identify the importance of representation projected in movies –as the part of mass media. Sukhan (2021) mentioned to *The Gazette* that “movies represent a close projection of reality” and it plays a big role to impact the whole society and provides a high possibility of it being a role model. This is what leads to civic imagination (Jenkins, 2020); an idea to promote imaginations of politics or cultural belief through the lens of popular culture. Certainly, people tend to spend more time watching movies nowadays. Movies, without a doubt, are one of the most influential ways to inject new thoughts regarding some issue into someone’s mind. It is critical for the media to revitalize people so that it would not misinterpret ideas about how people, in reality, are, Sukhan said in the interview.

Movies and TV shows are products of popular culture that have been attracting people's interest. There are no boundaries to how movies are produced, hence, they cover a lot of different genres, such as romance, comedy, horror, thriller, documentary, and superhero, which will be used as the movie object in this research.

Superhero is included in popular culture since they attract people with their fictional plots. With a meaning of a character who possesses physical power, and extraordinary abilities, distinct from normal human beings, they support society in a good way (Coogan 2006). The characters with those criteria are often depicted by men in any type of media, which can be visually sensed on television. These perspectives regarding society's expectations are shot through the lenses of the media, movies for example. One of the originals was *Superman (1978)* based on a comic with the same title released in 1938. This classic movie can be considered the start of superhero culture.

Since then, the representation of superheroes can be considered problematic, especially regarding gender roles (Palmer, 2008). The same thing could be applied in the context of race and ethnicity. Many new superhero characters popped up with the same stereotypes: men and white-washed heroes. These stereotypes of superheroes kept going for so long but changes were made when women started to be the main character of superhero movies, which indicated the advocate for equality in gender representation (Palmer, 2008). The shifting of the superhero stereotype could be sensed in the media nowadays. The growing number of diverse superheroes signifies attempts of consideration against disparities.

Now that society is exposed to the gently reduced or shifting stereotypes of superheroes, accepting changes would be the most appropriate attitude for the viewers as they adapt to what they usually see. From what form a superhero must have the criteria such as men and white-skinned, into more diverse criteria which are

not bound to gender, race, background, ethnicity, etc. Included as one of many Hollywood production houses, *Marvel Studios*, is a known American movie and television company that focused on superheroes (Flanagan, Livingstone, McKenny 2016). They have been demonstrating the shifting of superhero stereotypes in its contents. *Marvel Studios* proudly announced to provide more inclusivity and diversity in the *Marvel Universe*, as stated by the film producer and President of Physical, Post Production, VFX, and Animation of Marvel Studios, Victoria Alonso (Bonomolo 2019). The author specified this study to a more detailed issue which will be cultural problems. Few movies by Marvel Studios carried cultural diversities, such as *Black Panther* (2018), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), and *Ms. Marvel* (2022), which signified Marvel Studios' efforts to raise inclusivity and diversity. The representation of Chinese by Hollywood has been going on for a long time. Unfortunately, the movies mostly have been influenced by orientalist ways of thinking and racist stereotypes.

Previous research has proven that the representation of Chinese has been changing overtime, in the earlier period, Americans created representations of Chinese according to the imagination of the film producer (Chen, et.al, 2017). The study implied that Hollywood depict Chinese identical to Fu Manchu which is a character that always described as evil, wicked, and bad and it had had been going on for an entire century (Chen, et al. 2017). Fortunately, the emergence of many Chinese elements was displayed to utilize more authenticity of Chinese. This example could be derived from the modern orientalism which has dissolved and reformed (Said

1978, p 717). This development of orientalism is influenced by the by the film productions in America (Kang 2021) and how the society perceives it.

As a new Marvel movie released in 2021, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) brings out a new view on the *Marvel Universe* as the first-ever coming out of an Asian hero or in this case, portraying Chinese culture. As *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) carries cultural context, there is a possibility of how a Hollywood production house (Marvel Studios) represents the ‘Other’, in this case, representing Chinese culture. The main issue of Chinese representation is a form of orientalism because Marvel Studios acts as the west while it portrayed Chinese or the east. Expectations like “Asians can also be superheroes that defy the negative stereotypes of Asians,” (Yam 2019) have reassured society about the measures of Marvel’s inclusivity by producing several movies with colored characters as main characters.

Sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen responded to *HuffPost* (2019) about Marvel having another Asian representation from the previous movie, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), where Asians are referenced to a villain character, depicted as a threat, a group of barbarians, and the ‘exotic’ other. Having *Shang-Chi* could lead to the beginning of Asian people as hero representatives. Eckhardt (2018) analyzed the movie *Black Panther* (2018) and learned that the stereotype of African Americans has changed. It contrasts the traditional depiction of Africans by creating a fictional condition of advanced technologies and moreover unassociated with the Americans. *Wakanda*, a fictional country of wealth and long-way-step technologies proved that

Black Panther interpreted colonization (Eckhardt 2018). This movie broke the stereotype of superheroes being white-washed with T'Challa, a black man, as the main character with the familiar superhero name, *Black Panther*.

According to *The Jakarta Post* (2021), the statistics of Indonesian citizens' interest in Superhero based movie productions, out of 100%, 73.61% of Indonesians discuss Marvel movies rather than DC movies. This statistic proves that Indonesians are more exposed to Marvel movies to be able to discuss them casually. It means that Marvel, through the big platform that it had, could have been facilitating the representation of the cultural beliefs of the Chinese in the minds of society. Although the modern orientalism is notably in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), the orientalist view still managed to misguide how the society is accepting the representation.

The main reason for choosing *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) as an object of this research is because it carries the portrayal of cultural performances, which is Chinese culture. This film was distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures and produced by Marvel Studios. Directed and written by Destin Daniel Cretton with the help of Dave Callahan and Andrew Lanham, it was the only film of Marvel Studios which reflects the depth of Chinese Culture. The superhero genre has supplanted the western genre as a means of addressing “americanization, urbanization, and American identity” (Rosenberg & Coogan 2013, xvii). The western genre maintained this position for most of the 20th century.

Marvel Studios used to focus on portraying superheroes as identical to American culture, however, they became more open about releasing a new hero based on Asian culture, especially Chinese, in the context of this movie. Despite what Victoria Alonso stated earlier, the evocation of diversity and inclusivity from the plot and characters, the author wondered whether they would be carrying misleading implementation of the Chinese which leads to orientalist behavior.

Considering the research done on the object of the study, the writer surfaces the issue of how Chinese culture is displayed in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) movie by Marvel Studios, an American-based production house as an orientalist agent. Now that television has been put up with ‘cultural problems’ (Ellis 2002), it is unavoidable that the audiences are forced to accept the process of producing and remaking meanings and exploring possibilities (Ellis 2002). According to Cahyo (2017) cultural studies is denoted as something political rather than aesthetic. However, as the film is distributed, surely there is more to advertise how Westerners view Chinese just as described in the movie, which means that the portrayal of deep Chinese culture could be a practice to promote American superiority. In the US, the Chinese are included as minorities. They are forced to experience struggles with how the mass media represents them (Bullock 2018). By that fact, it is possible for the media to decide and ‘put’ thoughts about how Chinese characters are interpreted in the film. Hence, the author of the current study proposes an investigation of how Marvel Studios could mislead or misrepresent Chinese

culture which can be identified as orientalism. According to Said (1978), the orient refers to the east and the occident refers to the west. In this case, Marvel studios perform an orientalist behavior which identified them as the occident. Meanwhile, the orient referred to the Chinese characters in the movie.

The main story tells the adventure of Shang-Chi, his sister, and his female best friend stopping his misguided father from destroying the world by releasing dark spirits into the free air. It can be said that they are experiencing an adventure to another world, where mystical creatures that are able to protect humans exist. This movie was made by Americans with the aim to project the first Asian-based superhero. Not only had it become a huge success because of the production house, but the entertaining storylines also brought Chinese culture to the surface despite the American-based movie. Unfortunately, the writer discovered facts based on the movie which contradict the original aim, which is to become diverse and inclusive.

The introduction of Chinese traits could bring out a structure of lie, as Said (1978) proposed how the prejudice of the orient is a sign of western power over the orient. Although from a glimpse, it can be seen in the movie that the Chinese elements in Shang-Chi are valid, it does not lose the fact that a few scenes still show the misrepresented actions of the supposedly Chinese characters. For these reasons, bringing up the theory of representation to describe Chinese culture and applying orientalism theory to issue the problems of the Western view of the Chinese are appropriate to the finding results of this study.

Out of the behavior of the characters, some perfectly describe Chinese culture, but unfortunately, there is also some prejudice from the western implication regarding the Chinese. For this reason, there had been controversies between the Chinese and *the movie*. At first glance, Marvel served very deep Chinese elements; it can be seen from the title itself that it carries a Chinese name. The movie took place in such settings; traditional Chinese housings, a bamboo forest, and a training ground in the middle of rock mountains. This movie could be depicting a contrast in the cultural representation of China, which could be the reason why the movie was not well received in China in the first place (*The New York Times* 2021). After going through the research, the writer hopes to see a clear justification for whether Marvel depicts Chinese culture appropriately or the opposite.

Rather than conveying the characters' experience, television is more practically presented since it alluded to the political, personal, and institutional consequences of actual events on television (Sukhan 2019). Thus, how movies represent one's culture is most likely impactful to deal with in real life. The main thread that will keep this study going is to analyze the characters' behavior, dialogue, and other elements that might cause a cultural problem such as Shang-Chi, Xu Wenwu, Xu Xialing, Ying Li, Ying Nan, Katy, etc. The object's significance is the existence of Asian culture and its comparison to western culture and orientalism itself. Part of the analysis will be to profile the orientalist (Marvel Studios) way of depicting the orient (the Chinese characters).

To support this study for a better upcoming result, the author chooses to apply the representation theory by Stuart Hall as a theory to provide dependable results on the misrepresentation of Chinese culture for the readers. On top of that, to make sure the interpretations of findings are more accurate, it will be done with the help of orientalism theory by Edward Said to clarify the Chinese traits of western media from the characters of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021). It provided an orientalist point of view in view of the fact that this theory is suitable for the topic of the current study. This brings the whole analysis to the misinterpreted east from the west. Each theory used by the author would be elaborated thoroughly to reach an easy understanding for the readers. Their difference will be revealed and interpreted in the terms of the relevant facts or ideas based on previous studies.

After revealing the connection, then the author will be conducting further analysis of the orientalism poured in the movie. From here, a couple of confronting questions may appear to the surface. What is the representation of Chinese that can be seen in the movie? Between American and Chinese culture, which one stood out the most? How is the representation of Chinese going on throughout the movie? The uncertainty produced by these questions will keep this paper occupied to find the reasoning behind its ambiguity.

Based on the former paragraphs, it is important to provide literary resources in order to make a position of the current study. There are many papers that indicate how Asian culture is represented in the media of the west. As minorities, Asians used

to be portrayed in a misguided way and often marginalized. To produce the gap, here are some research papers to be used as the previous study for the foundation of the current study.

A study by Prawara (2016) entitled *A Post-Colonial Study: Orientalism as Portrayed in The Karate Kid Movie*, analyzed the characterization of the east and the west from the movie *The Karate Kid* using post-colonial and orientalism theory. It concludes that the west showed a superiority complex of the west to dominate the east. *The Representation of Orientalism in Salman Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is focused on a novel by Salman Rushdie. Hariani (2016) mentioned that the novel brought some socio-cultural issues that stereotyped the eastern.

There were different purposes that do not fit the author's aim of the current study. As said by Hooks (1992), other cultures are used for spice and seasoning to liven up the bland white culture. In this context, depending on the orientalist view, the east is used to cover up the narcissistic behavior of the west. Accordingly, after understanding the previous study as a step further to complete the paper, the author of this study will reference them and hone it to reach a content result. The aim is to pinpoint the misrepresentation of Chinese from *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) which was produced by a studio wishing to promote diversity and inclusivity in its characters. Said's orientalism theory will be the main theory used and representation theory by Stuart Hall is supposed to be the supporting theory in

some parts. This study applied narrative and non-narrative approaches to collect more credible results on Chinese representation

What distinguishes this research from the previous studies is the use of representation theory and adding an orientalist perspective to unwrap the misrepresented Chinese culture within the object used, *Shang-Chi* (2021). From the previous studies, orientalism is a valid theory until this day because interpretations of the west towards the east are still prejudiced. As Said (1978) argued, orientalism is still questionable from a few aspects, questions such as “How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Are other cultures useful?” (Dirlik 2012) are unavoidable to confirm orientalism itself. The portrayal of Chinese culture brought *Shang-Chi* to the shades of irrelevance to the advanced Chinese society in the present time. To understand the fundamentals of Chinese culture, the author provided comparisons of how the west is portrayed and how the Chinese are portrayed in the film.

The method to be used in this research paper is qualitative by exploring multiple meanings of individual experiences that are structurally built socially and historically to develop a fresh theory (Creswell 1994). The data collected will mainly be taken from *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* movie 2021, more specifically, through the characters of Shang-Chi, Xu Wenwu, Xu Xialing, Li, Ying Nan, and Katy. By using the narrative non-narrative approach, the writer will use the existing conversation between characters and settings of the movie to observe the

engagement of the topic and its relevance. Other sources of information would be taken from academic articles, journals, and books that still relate to the focus of this study. In addition, the author would conduct close reading to concrete her writing and add any supporting ideas regarding the topic. Further data would be using representation theory supported by orientalism theory to depict how *Marvel* as an orientalist perceives Chinese culture based on the characters in this superhero movie.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

After arranging the background of the study, this paper will be discussing the problems that resurface regarding the topic and issues discussed which are:

1. How is Chinese Culture represented in the movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021)?
2. How Does Marvel represent the Chinese as Superheroes?

1.3 The Objective of The Study

To provide insights on how the *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) movie projects Asian culture. The author argues against *Marvel*'s claim that it supports the diversity of race and gender in the context of superheroes. As an American-based production company, they portray what they think Asian culture is in the eyes of westerners. Thus, orientalism is present. This study proves how orientalism is implied in the movie by the enactment of misrepresentation regarding Chinese culture. It also examined the significance of Chinese as superhero.

1.4 Significance of The Study

This paper expects promising significance that can be helpful practically and theoretically. The assessment of this study reveals the existing aspects of orientalism and how it was portrayed against Asian culture in reality. In theory, the author wishes for this study to become another example of an orientalist study that segregates Asian and western cultures. In practice, hopefully, this research can help other soon-to-be researchers to accommodate their future research, especially in the English Department field. This study is solid proof that the author did this in order to gain more knowledge and provide a significant examination of Chinese portrayals in the movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021)

1.5 Definition of Key terms

- Chinese : Anything that is related to China, its people, or its language (Cambridge Dictionary).
- Culture : The principles of preserving the ‘best that has been thought and spoken’ in society and contribute to the disparities in people’s daily lives (Hall, 1997)
- Orientalism : The European view toward the orient in the context of social, political, and cultural values (Said 1978)
- Representation: A process to give meaning to something with the use of language (Hall 1997)
- Superhero : A character with a certain physical power, and

extraordinary abilities that support society in a good way (Coogan 2006)