Swimming Across the World: The Portrayal of Mermaid in Mermaid and Swordsman, The Little Mermaid Live Action and Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia

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ABSTRACT

Mermaids are one of the most popular mythological creatures and are often discussed today. It's no wonder that nowadays, mermaids are featured in various media, including films. More interestingly, it turns out that each culture has a different interpretation of mermaids, especially their portrayal. This research explores the portrayal of mermaids in three cultural contexts depicted in the films Mermaid and Swordsman (China), The Little Mermaid Live Action (Denmark), and Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia (Indonesia). Using Hayward's (2018) theoretical framework, this analysis categorises these representations into 2 framework perspectives: syncretic and mermaidisation, highlighting cultural integration and transformation in their depiction. The results show that Chinese mermaids combine elements of traditional mythology with cultural motifs, such as traditional *hanfu* clothing. In Denmark, mermaid depictions blend classical folklore and modern interpretations of values. Meanwhile, mermaids in Indonesia feature innovative elements, such as an upright swimming style and the integration of local fish motifs that reflect the archipelago's distinctive cultural adaptations. By analysing representation in narratives of various cultures, this research contributes to understanding how cultural adaptation is depicted in the representation of mythological creatures, such as mermaids. In addition, this research also provides insights for future interdisciplinary studies on how mermaids are portrayed in various cultures in popular media such as film, mythology, and cultural studies.

ABSTRAK

Putri duyung merupakan salah satu makhluk mitologi yang cukup populer dan sering diperbincangkan hingga saat ini. Tidak heran jika saat ini banyak yang mengangkatnya ke dalam berbagai media, termasuk film. Yang lebih menarik lagi, ternyata setiap budaya memiliki interpretasi yang berbeda mengenai putri duyung, terutama penggambarannya. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi penggambaran putri duyung dalam tiga konteks budaya yang digambarkan dalam film *Mermaid and Swordsman* (Cina), *The Little Mermaid Live Action* (Denmark), dan *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia* (Indonesia). Dengan menggunakan kerangka teori (Hayward, 2018), analisis ini mengkategorikan representasi ini ke dalam 2 kerangka perspektif: sinkretis dan mermaidisasi, menyoroti integrasi dan transformasi budaya dalam penggambarannya. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa putri duyung Cina menggabungkan elemen mitologi tradisional dengan motif budaya, seperti pakaian tradisional hanfu. Di Denmark, penggambaran putri duyung memadukan antara cerita rakyat klasik dan interpretasi nilai-

nilai modern. Sementara itu, putri duyung di Indonesia menampilkan elemen inovatif, seperti gaya berenang tegak dan integrasi motif ikan lokal yang mengrefleksikan adaptasi budaya khas Nusantara. Dengan menganalisis bagaimana representasi dalam narasi berbagai budaya, penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam memahami bagaimana adaptasi budaya digambarkan dalam representasi makhluk mitologis, seperti putri duyung. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga memberikan wawasan bagi kajian interdisipliner di masa yang akan datang mengenai bagaimana putri duyung digambarkan dalam berbagai budaya dalam media populer seperti pada film, mitologi, dan studi budaya.

Kata Kunci: Culture; Portrayal; Mermaid; Syncretic; Mermadisation.

Introduction

Mythology, according to (Mark, 2018), is a belief system owned by a group of people, which stands on a foundation that explains stories that are sacred in the past. This has sparked curiosity about the visualisation of mythological creatures such as; dragons, pegasus, unicorns, phoenixes, kitsunes, sirens, mermaids, and others. Among these mythological creatures, mermaids have a particularly distinctive and character-defining visualisation, that is depicted as a hybrid of a human and a fish. It typically has the upper body of a human, including the head, arms, and torso, and the lower body of a fish, including the tail (Jensen, 2023). However, different cultures have varying portrayals, where each culture has its own unique characteristics that make it interesting to explore and discover the similarities and differences in three movies from three different countries. Based on the theory of (Hayward, 2018), he identified that the mermaid has been represented in a variety of ways, including where she is hyper-sexualised and/or represented as a dangerous predator. The Following examples are the examples are the portrayal of mermaids from Chinese, Denmarks, and Indonesian cultures:
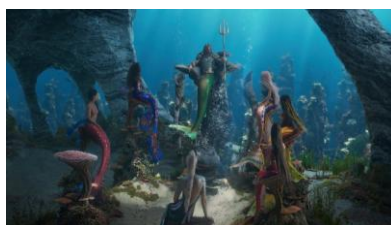

Figure 1: *Mermaid and Swordsman*, Figure 2: *The Little Mermaid Live Actions, Figure 3: Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia*

The mermaid portrayals in the three different countries have their own unique charms. Not only the portrayals in these three countries, but portrayals from various other cultures also have different depictions, myths, and legends about mermaids. Those depictions of mermaids according to ancient fairy tales and the depictions of mermaids over time also have significant changes. The mermaid's innately portmanteau form and related instability as half human, half fish and the Western tradition of its transformativity- whereby it can switch between mer- and fully human forms -makes it an appropriate and malleable figure for complex negotiations of role and identity.

The term commonly used to refer to a mermaid in contemporary Mandarin is *měirényú*. This is derived from the traditional term *rényú*, (literally 'person-fish') used to refer to dugongs often attributed with human-like characteristics and, by extension, to other aquatic creatures with some human characteristics. *Mìi* means beautiful and the term serves to identify its

described entity as a mermaid although the Chinese term does not specify the abruptly divided human or piscine form that typifies contemporary mermaids. Nowadays, mermaid depictions are the same, with an upper-half entirely human and low-half entirely piscine, except that the depiction of mermaids in movies in this modern era has changed by highlighting how beautiful mermaids are using more varied visualisation of hair, clothing, and legs.

The portrayal in China depicts mermaids wearing clothes that are associated with the traditional culture of the country, namely combining with *hanfu* which looks more polite and closed. The depiction of mermaid tails in Mermaids and Swordsman is that all mermaids have white tails, but the main character in this movie has a different tail from other mermaids, her tail is red because it is told that she has the embodiment of koi fish and has the essence of dragon blood. Meanwhile, Denmark depicts mermaids that vary by using various colours and accentuating that the mermaids in the movie are sea creatures. Then, Indonesia depicts mermaids that represent several ornamental fish, such as; nemo and blue tang with several others that take random sampling.

Previous studies investigating mermaids flourish. First study by (Çomak, 2018) provides a solid foundation for understanding how the mermaid image has transformed from ancient myths into a contemporary symbol rich in cultural, mythological, and commercial meanings. Second study from (Tyus, 2015) examines Hans Christian Andersen's Disney movie the Little Mermaid with the focus on the significance of the physical portrayal of Ariel. Third study from (Darwin, 2015) revealed that a migratory legend attested throughout north-western Europe that linked to Irish families, reveals similarities with other tales of aquatic female ancestors and their shared social functions. Fourth study is from (Ross, 2016) in his journal discusses that this journal may explore how Miyazaki transformed the original story of *The Little Mermaid* into *Kaguya-hime no Monogatari* (The Tale of The Princess Kaguya), focusing on changes in themes, characters, and symbolism in the context of Japanese culture. The last study is from (Nolfi, 2019) in his article more focusing on the Little Mermaid gender role, the more independent woman that lives in our standard. Then and also criticised the little mermaid storyline for not making sense in real life.

Several previous studies, as shown by Darwin, Comak, and Ross, have revealed appearances of mermaids based on various regional cultures. Meanwhile, Tyus and Nofli's research discussed appearances and gender roles found in the movie *The Little Mermaid*. However, previous studies have not yet explored the portrayal of mermaids in the movies *Mermaid and Swordsman, The Little Mermaid Live Action,* and *Mermaid in Love.* To address the issues, we formulate the question as follow:

1. **How do *Mermaid and Swordsman*, *The Little Mermaid Live Action*, and *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia* portray mermaids?**

To answer the question, we employed the theory of (Hayward, 2017) claiming that mermaids are becoming an increasingly standardised base in the Western culture. They were prominently depicted as female humans with the lower part of a fish. Hayward argues that the mermaid represents the breadth and depth of western media and audiovisual variation as they develop art and collaborate with the latest, highly developed technology.
(Hayward, 2017) claims that mermaids are liminal beings that, by bridging the gap between the natural and cultural realms, symbolise the union of the two. They embody both danger and allure, symbolising the human fascination with the mysteries of the ocean. In many different societies, mermaids are cultural symbols that stand for aspirations, anxieties, and the unknown. When discussing the characteristics of people, objects, or phenomena, we can look at them in terms of physical, mental, or even abstract characteristics such as behaviour or personality and other things. As studied by (Hayward, 2018), mermaids have developed into international symbols that reflect a variety of different values, meanings, and cultural contexts. Some of the main characteristics of mermaids according to this theory are hybridity and ambiguity indicating the fusion of human and fish elements from which identity ambiguity

arises. In Hayward's view, this hybridity reflects the encounter between humans and nature, between land and sea. It is also mentioned that the mermaid is a transformation from a local creature to a global icon as one of the main themes which explains how the figure of the mermaid, which was originally part of local folklore, developed into a global icon through media and globalisation. (Hayward, 2018) highlighted that the mermaid figure has been 'internationalised' by the influence of commercialisation, such as Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), which spread the image of the mermaid around the world. Other characteristics of the mermaid are described, such as the symbol of femininity and gender appeal, beauty, representation of ecology and relationship with the sea, ambivalence between attractiveness and danger, commodification, cultural variation and locality, changes in meaning through time and physical appearance.

Consistent with this characteristic and definition, depictions and physical appearances of mermaids vary significantly across different regions and cultures. Based on (Hayward, 2017), Myths and folklore from various cultures portray mermaids as having beautiful faces and enchanting tails. However, some myths describe mermaids as having a frightening and unattractive appearance. Mermaids appear in the folklore of many cultures worldwide, shaping not only oral literature and narratives but also the cultural landscape and design. Based on (Çomak, 2018), there are some statues and sculptures of mermaids that can be found in many countries and cultures, with over 130 public art mermaid statues worldwide. The one in Copenhagen is the most famous. In American and Indonesian cultures, depictions of mermaid physical appearance tend to be similar. Indonesian mermaids, known as *"duyung"* are described as having beautiful features, long hair, and lovely skin. They are often portrayed as friendly and kind. However, in American culture, there are some stories of mischievous or evil mermaids. In Chinese culture, mermaids are often referred to as *"jiao nü"* and are depicted as having a more frightening appearance. They are described as having sharp teeth and claws and are associated with storms and shipwrecks. In Chinese culture, *jiao nü* are said to lure sailors to their doom with their beautiful songs. In Africa, mermaids like *Mami Wata* and *Iemanjá* are associated with water deities and spiritual power. These creatures may have snake-like tails or blue or green skin, reflecting the reverence for water and nature in African cultures. In Japanese culture, mermaids are called *"ningyo"* and are said to be the spirits of drowned people. In other stories, *ningyo* are described as mythical creatures. Their most distinctive physical feature is a fish-like body with a human face and a monkey-like mouth. In Turkish culture, mermaids are called *"shah-i-meran."* They are said to live underground near water sources and are depicted as half-woman, half-reptile, often with snake-like features. All of those characteristics and physical appearance of mermaids can also be found in some movies.
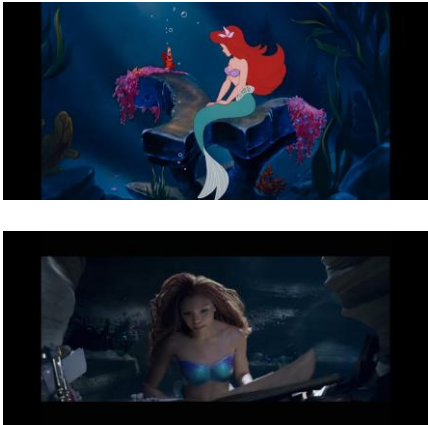
(Hayward, 2018) states that mermaids are typically confined to specific roles in Western audiovisual content, such as being gay or effeminate, elderly (implicitly post-sexual), or adolescent (implicitly pre-sexual). On the other hand, Bāgç holds a very different symbolic place. They say that the image of mermaid seems to be somewhat spread all over the world in different cultures and geographies. Even if it could be found in the old mythologies as well as new narratives in different settings, the modern image of the mermaid seems to be much more stereotyped and branded with Disney's movie. In popular American culture, the mermaid has taken on the additional symbol of female rites of passage and pubescent change from girl to woman. Mermaid movies in the late 20th century revolve around "painful 'growth' experiences" that address the fears and experiences of growing up female. For example, in the movie The Little Mermaid, Arial is allowed to sing only if her song does not threaten patriarchal order. Perhaps if only the little mermaid was heard by her father first, she wouldn't be following her instincts to be loved perhaps more by her prince. Ariel, wants to leave her father's underwater kingdom to make a name for herself in the human world. In an analysis of *"Sawdust Tales"* Öcel and Çomak put forward an important aspect. In most of the fables and fairy tales, it is the mermaid who is saving the life of the human beings, usually of the prince who is kind enough to rule the kingdom. But in the movie, it is just the opposite. The death of Ishak could lead to the rescue of the mermaid. Ishak's only desire is to save the mermaid owned by the

Blind Fisherman, and to put her back to the sea. In the mermaid stories or in legends, usually there is a Prince who falls into deep waters to be rescued by the mermaid. Yet in the Turkish version, quite contradictory to the other versions, Ishak wants to save the mermaid.

Research Methods

The data of this qualitative study were in textual and visual forms. Textual forms refer to the narration, description, and dialogue surrounding the mermaids while visual forms refer to the physical appearances of the mermaids. These data were collected from *Mermaid and Swordsman, The Little Mermaid Live Action,* and *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia.*

Table 1. The Physical Appearance and Body Move of Mermaid in Movie.

Title	Reason	Visualisation
Mermaid and Swordsman	The physical appearance of the mermaid shows that the mermaid wearing Chinese traditional clothes *hanfu*, which is the production team, tried to collaborate Chinese culture.	
The Little Mermaid Live Action	The physical transformation of the mermaid, from a bright-haired redhead with fair skin to a dark-haired, curly-haired mermaid with darker skin, has disappointed many. They feel that this new portrayal does not accurately represent the Ariel they have come to know.	
Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia	In *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia,* the movement of the mermaids is portrayed in a unique way. The mermaids swim in a standing position, using their arms in a back-and-forth and up-and-down motion. This depiction of swimming differs from the typical portrayal of mermaids.	

Data were collected from We TV, Disney Plus, and Vidio. (Spradley, 2016) data analysis technique was used in this study. There are four phases of analysis, namely domain, taxonomy, componential, and finding the cultural theme. The first is domain analysis. (Hayward, 2018) Mermaid theory was applied to categorise the depiction techniques of mermaids into syncretic

or mermaidisation. After categorising the mermaid depictions, taxonomy analysis commenced. Mermaids are closely related to having a charming physical appearance and graceful behaviour. In addition, mermaids are creatures that live side by side with humans. Some mermaids even have the ability to transform into humans. Here, the findings from the domain and taxonomy analysis are presented in a table to show the relationship between the two. From the statement, it can be linked between the category of mermaids and the type of mermaid, namely transformative and non-transformative.

Table 2. The Type of Mermaid in Movie

Title	Syncretic		Mermaidisation	
	Trans	**Non-Trans**	**Trans**	**Non-Trans**
Mermaid and Swordsman	v			
The Little Mermaid Live Action				
Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia				

The last is finding the cultural theme. In the final stage, each movie and its type are analysed to show the category and type of mermaid. Chinese people value the culture inherited from their ancestors, including *hanfu*. (Li & Löfgren, 2021) states that *Hanfu* (漢服) is a word made up of two characters combining the words *Han* (漢) and clothing (服), the term causes misunderstanding when it is first recognised by the public, who may think that it is the clothing of the *Han* dynasty. In a general sense, *Hanfu* includes various styles of traditional clothing from several dynasties, except for the Qing and Yuan dynasties which were founded by minority groups. To express their pride in their culture, Chinese people often combine common things with their culture. In denmark culture, the story of the mermaid is depicted with a tail that has magic and dangling curls. It is said that the mermaid fell in love with the fisherman, so the mermaid created a song that can enchant anyone who hears it. In Indonesian culture, there are many folklores about mermaids, including those originating from Hindu, Javanese, Dutch, and other cultures. These stories encompass a variety of religious influences and regional traditions, creating cultural elements that persist to this day.

Result and Discussion
1. Syncretic

Syncretic theory according to (Hayward, 2018) means the combining of elements from different cultural or religious traditions into something new and complex. Figures or stories do not come from a single source, but are blended from many influences, creating new meanings that change according to cultural context. This shows how cultures absorb and adapt outside elements to form locally relevant symbols or stories.

Table 3. The Syncretic Mermaid and Their Transformative

Title	Description	Trans – Non Trans
Mermaids and Swordsman	In *Mermaid and Swordsman*, mermaids are portrayed with a combination of folklore and culture that is characterised by the use of *hanfu* as their clothing.	Yu Ji as the main character is the only mermaid who can transform into a human because she has dragon blood. Meanwhile, other mermaids cannot transform into humans because they are pure mermaids.

| The Little Mermaid Live Action | In The *Little Mermaid Live Action* represents mermaids by taking the folklore culture of *mami wata* with characteristic dark skin colour and dark red dreadlocks | Ariel is the only mermaid who can turn into a human because she drank a potion from the ursula with the condition to kiss her true love within 3 days to become fully human. |

Referring to (Hayward, 2018), the history and culture of mermaids in China began with ancient stories that combined local elements and external influences. The commonly used term for mermaids in contemporary Chinese is *měirényú*, derived from rényú ('fish-man'), originally referring to dugongs and other aquatic creatures with human features. *Měi* means beautiful, making it a designation for mermaids, although it does not necessarily describe a form split between human and fish like the Western version. (Atoyebi, 2023) describes aquatic humanoids date back to ancient times. *Sōu Shén Jì* of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 CE) recorded the story of *jiāorén*, mermaid-like creatures from the South Seas who could weave fine cloth and cry tears that turned into pearls, associating them with mystery and the arts. (Tarr, 2023) states in the 20th century, Western fairy tales such as Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* influenced Chinese culture, bringing themes of beauty, love and sacrifice, making mermaids symbols of exoticism and romantic idealism. In the movie *Mermaid and Swordsman*, we are told that mermaids can summon humans into the water to trap them. Yu Ji, as the main character, fantasises about falling in love with a human, and he meets Yin Ching, who falls into the water by accident. Then what's interesting here is that the mermaids who appear use traditional Chinese clothing, namely *hanfu*. Here, the mermaids in the *Mermaid and Swordsman* movie are included in Syncretic, which means that the mermaids are collaborating with the culture in China itself. It can be seen that the production team is trying to present the form of mermaids with local beliefs about mermaids. Then when mermaids change to human, here Yu Ji drinks a potion from Sea Witch and she changes into a real human to meet Yin Ching.

The Little Mermaid, originally titled *Den lille havfrue*, is a tale penned by the Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen. Published in 1837 as part of a collection of fairy tales for children, the story follows a mermaid who relinquishes her life at sea to gain a human soul. This tale achieved immense popularity, leading Disney to adapt it into an animated movie in 1989 with slight alterations to cater to a younger audience. Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* garnered significant attention and remains the most popular mermaid cartoon to date. This animation has served as a reference for numerous movies and series worldwide in depicting mermaids, both in terms of physical appearance and storyline. In 2023, Disney decided to create a live-action adaptation, blending the story with the folklore of *Mami Wata*, an African-American mermaid myth. The physical transformation of the mermaid from animation to live-action is evident. The animated mermaid's fair skin and wavy red hair are absent in the live-action version. Based on (Mohulatsi, 2023), *The Little Mermaid Live Action* refers to the long history of black mermaids in African folklore and mythology. (Patrizi, 2023) states that in the beginning of 16th Century with the arrival of enslaved Africans via the Atlantic slave trade, the traditions, beliefs and practices honouring their ancestral water deities were transplanted into the US. These South Carolinian 'low-country' sea spirit's include a river mermaid as a surrogate mother and a captive mermaid who punishes the living for denying their freedom. Disney has designed the mermaid to resemble Mami Wata, featuring darker skin and tightly curled red hair. This has sparked considerable debate among fans of *The Little Mermaid.* Many lament the alteration of the mermaid's appearance, feeling it deviates from the image of Ariel they had envisioned. However, whether it's the original tale, the animated version, or the live-action adaptation, *The Little Mermaid* consistently maintains the core narrative of Ariel's transformation into a human, as this transformation is the essence of the story.

2. Mermaidisation

(Hayward, 2018) states that the definition of mermaidisation refers to the increasing popularity and influence of mermaid mythology and imagery in contemporary culture. This trend involves the appropriation and reinterpretation of mermaid folklore, often with a focus on themes of beauty, femininity, and the allure of the unknown.

Table. 4 The Mermaidisation Mermaid and Their Transformative

Title	*Description*	*Trans – Non-Trans*
Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia	In *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia* mermaids are embodied in mermaidisation which is shown through the way they swim in a standing position.	As shown in *Mermaid in Love 2,* Ariel can transform into a human by wearing a necklace from a mermaid ancestor and by drying all her scales.

(Hayward, 2018) points out that modern Indonesian language has many different terms to describe mythological creatures, such as mermaids. Four of these modifications of the term *duyung* (dugong) indicate a dugong, such as; *putri duyung* (girl/dugong), *ikan duyung* (fish/dugong) and *ikan duyung perempuan* (fish/dugong/woman). (Kristianto et al., 2024) states that Indonesia as a maritime archipelago nation with many coastal cultures, presents marine mythology, legends, and folklore related to the sea, such as Nyi Roro Kidul and Nyi Blorong. Both are considered sea queens who were once humans but now inhabit the sea with the upper body of a human and a long snake-like tail. (Hayward, 2018) mentions that *Mermaid in Love* and its sequel, *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia*, take Disney's version of Andersen's tale, such as the main characters' names, Ariel and Eric, and combine a similar teenage scenario depiction to H2O. In the movie *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia*, the general findings show that mermaidisation became a phenomenon due to the portrayal of the mermaid's swimming style in the movie, which was done by standing, which is generally not done. Not only the portrayal of the swimming style, but another phenomenal thing in the general findings is the male mermaid character who does not have a tail. Mermaids in *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia* are said to be transformative because they can change from mermaid to human and vice versa.

Conclusions

Mythological creatures across various cultures often present diverse perspectives, especially regarding mermaids. In three cultures: China, Denmark, and Indonesia, significant differences can be observed in the portrayal of mermaids based on folklore, popular movies, and series. Danish culture, as seen in the live-action movie *The Little Mermaid,* presents a syncretic depiction of mermaids. This is evident in the amalgamation of the story itself with the folklore of *Mami-Wata.* The mermaid's physical appearance, embodied by the main character "Ariel," features a darker skin tone, curly dark red hair, and a beautifully depicted tail with intricate upper and lower fins that gracefully undulate as she swims. The Chinese movie, *Mermaid and the Swordsman* also offers a syncretic portrayal, blending the mermaid folklore with cultural elements, such as the *hanfu* worn by the mermaid. The movie's setting and storyline are also set in imperial and ancient China. Conversely, the Indonesian series *Mermaid in Love 2 Dunia* presents a mermaidisation of the concept. This is evident in the portrayal of mermaids with ornamental fish patterns, an unusual swimming style with an upright body position, and even the depiction of male mermaids without fish tails. This series is also an adaptation of Disney's *The Little Mermaid.*

Based on the previously mentioned movies, mermaids are depicted as beautiful and have the ability to transform into humans. However, not all mermaids are told to be able to

transform into humans or vice versa. This can be an interesting topic to discuss in the future. This research can be the basis of future research on the topic of transformative mermaids in movies using cultural perspectives from various countries. Researchers can distinguish between transformative transformation (essential change of identity) and non-transformative (temporary change without deep identity change). This study can explore modern adaptations and compare cross-cultural views on transformation in folklore from different countries.

The benefit of practice that can be taken from the above research is that this article can be used as a reference to pay more attention to mermaid theory, namely syncretic theory and mermaidisation. Through practice that can be done immediately after reading this article, especially for movie producers who want to make a movie or series project about mermaids, it would be better if the depiction of mermaids can be adjusted to the culture that will be taken. The basis of reference to be applied to the mermaid that will be produced by the writer or director, not solely for aesthetics.

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