

## There's a Mulan for All Seasons

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### Body

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Is she a novice or a skilled fighter? Does she end up a blushing bride or does she kill herself? The legend of the female warrior has morphed greatly over some 1,500 years.

When rumors of a live-action, nonmusical version of "Mulan" began to trickle out a few years ago, many hard-core fans of the 1998 Disney original groused. No big musical numbers and soaring ballads? No Mushu, the wisecracking dragon, or Li Shang, the movie's clearly conflicted love interest? No "Reflection"? Many felt that the filmmakers were being unfaithful to the Mulan legend -- or at least to Disney's own version of it.

But Mulan has always been the most adaptable of heroines. Long before fans criticized Disney for taking liberties with their beloved animated heroine, poets, writers, playwrights and filmmakers had been creating scores of wildly different versions of the legendary woman warrior. In some, she's a hardened army general; in others, she has magical powers; in yet others, she's a crack shot with a bow. In one animated version, she's a bug.

Over the centuries, she's been celebrated in stage plays and operas, in musicals and TV series, in picture books and novels and young-adult fiction. On the big screen, she's starred in silent movies ("Hua Mulan Joins the Army" from 1927); a gorgeous, full-color musical by the legendary Shaw Brothers ("Lady General Hua Mu-Lan," 1964); a gritty, action-filled war epic ("Mulan: Rise of a Warrior," from 2009, with Zhao Wei) -- as well as a certain Disney animated movie, featuring a tiny red dragon.

In the latest "Mulan," premiering Sept. 4 on Disney+, the Chinese-American actress Yifei Liu stars in a tale that blends stunning battle sequences (the film's \$200 million budget included a portion for 80 trick riders from Kazakhstan and Mongolia) with a story that makes much of the story's gender-bending subtexts.

[Video: Watch on YouTube.]

And while there's no Mushu ("we really needed Mulan to face her own challenges and make her own decisions," the director Niki Caro noted), there are several references to the 1998 animated film. There are also nods to various older versions of the story, most notably the "Ballad of Mulan," the poem from the fifth or sixth century that started it all.

"Ballad of Mulan" is a relatively simple tale, only six stanzas long: Mulan leaves her village to take her infirm father's place in the emperor's army. For a dozen years, she serves nobly, all while disguised as a man; in the end,

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she refuses rewards and honors to return home, where her former comrades learn at long last that, surprise, Mulan is female.

The poem ends with an image of two rabbits ("how can you tell the female from the male?") running alongside each other -- a scene replicated in the new movie.

"Any time there was an image from the ballad, I wanted to bring it to the film," Caro said. "Obviously, a lot of the international audience might not know the ballad, but for the ones who do, it's nice."

After the original poem, subsequent versions of the Mulan story added plotlines and details to flesh out the tale. In the 16th-century play "The Heroine Mulan Goes to War in Her Father's Place," she has bound feet. "At the time, women in the upper classes would bind their feet, and the playwright wanted to make sure Mulan was seen as the ideal icon of femininity," said Lan Dong, author of "Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States" and an English professor at the University of Illinois Springfield. "She had to be perfect."

In the 1695 novel "The Romance of Sui and Tang Dynasties," Mulan meets a fellow female warrior who becomes her sworn sister; in the end, Mulan takes her own life when the Khan summons her to be his concubine. "Many versions emphasize her virtue," Professor Dong said. "Even after all those years and everything she's put herself through, she kept herself untouched."

The screen adaptations further expand the legend. In the 1939 Chinese film "Mulan Joins the Army," the heroine is a skilled hunter, fighter and eventually, general; the film ends with Mulan as a blushing bride.

The Huangmei opera film "Lady General Hua Mu-Lan" is perhaps the most exuberant of the pre-Disney bunch. In addition to flashy combat sequences, vibrant costumes and hot-potato-style drinking games (during which Mulan gets blotto), the movie features singing galore. Everybody sings, about everything imaginable: Dad's asthma; the importance of filial piety; gender roles and the unequal division of labor in the home; those "reckless and pushy" barbarians invading our homeland, and so on.

When the Disney filmmakers first started work on the latest Mulan story, they turned to a range of versions for inspiration. There was the original ballad, of course, as well as regional variations, which they examined with the help of advisers from China. They looked at plays and films, including the drama with Zhao Wei. "We dug in fairly deeply to look at the arc of the story," said Jason Reed, one of the producers, "to see what elements had stayed consistent over time, and which elements had been tailored to fit the time and the medium that the story was being retold in."

In many tellings, Mulan is a skilled fighter before joining the army. The animated version portrayed Mulan as a novice (before that hummable boot-camp sequence makes a "man" out of her), but in the latest outing, we learn that Mulan has been trained by her dad from the time she was a girl.

Another central theme in the legend is filial piety, with Mulan getting her parents' blessing before heading off to war. Filial piety also dictates that she return home to her parents after her tours of duty are over. Her cross-dressing is forgiven (there was a war on, after all), as long as she resumes her proper place as a daughter and wife, postwar. "That's why, despite her transgressions, she was put on a pedestal even in premodern China," Professor Dong said. "She's breaking the rules without threatening the system."

In both Disney movies, Mulan sneaks off under cover of darkness, hardly the obedient daughter. The new one, however, further tweaks the Mulan legend, even as it plays up the virtue of filial piety in ways unexplored in the animated original. "In every previous version we could find, she always ends up coming back and just returning to her old life, and we thought that that was not a satisfying ending for her journey," said Amanda Silver, who co-wrote the screenplay with Rick Jaffa (they share credit with Lauren Hynek and Elizabeth Martin).

Silver and Jaffa were particularly inspired by the ballad's emotion and scope. ("It very succinctly talks about what she goes through in battle," Silver said.) But the animated original was always one of their primary inspirations, and you can see nods, and more than nods, throughout.

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Everyone involved in the new movie had favorite scenes and elements from the Disney original, things they had to have in this latest effort. Jaffa loved the sequence where the soldiers discuss their ideal woman, although in this go-round, he said, "we thought it was super important to tell that more clearly from Mulan's point of view."

For Caro, it was the matchmaker scene, in which Mulan comically and spectacularly fails her "good wife" test, and the avalanche, a key battle scene in the original. "With all the technology at our disposal, of course we were going to do that," she said.

And this being an action epic, there's much more fighting than in the original, particularly by Mulan. The film has the look and feel of Zhang Yimou's wuxia epics (think: "Hero" and "House of Flying Daggers"), with flowing robes and flashing swords, soldiers running across rooftops and sprinting up walls. Popular veterans of his films (Gong Li, Donnie Yen, Jet Li) even have starring roles. "I was hugely inspired by his work," Caro said. ("The Disney brand is that you can't actually show violence," she noted, so there are no wuxia-style disembowelments or spurting arcs of blood.)

Not only did we have to see Mulan fight, said Caro, we had to see her fight as a woman -- hence, all those shots of Yifei Liu sans body-concealing armor, her long flowing hair unrestrained by hat or helmet. "In this version, what she learns is that she won't be truly powerful until she's herself, until she accepts the power she has as a young woman," Caro added.

The film also added characters like Gong Li's shape-shifting sorceress, a striking counterpoint to Mulan's trussed-up soldier. There's also enough longing looks and scenes of unrequited love to satisfy the most fervent fan of rom-coms. "I love the gender fluidity that's inherent in the story," Caro said. "And there's a scene between Mulan and Gong Li's character that's literally directed like a love scene. It's all conscious, and yet the movie can also live for a general audience quite happily."

How will this version play to fans of the original -- whether the ballad or the Disney animated one? "I know we're not going to please everybody," Caro said. "But I do think there's a reason that the story has been so resonant and relevant for, what, over 1,300 years? And telling it in live action, my hope was that I would make it possible for everybody, including those who were so protective of the animation, to enjoy her again in a new way."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/movies/mulan-history.html>

## Graphic

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PHOTOS: From top: Yifei Liu in the new "Mulan"

from the Huangmei opera version, "Lady General Hua Mu-Lan"

from Disney's 1998 animated movie

and Zhao Wei played the title role in "Mulan: Rise of a Warrior," from 2009. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY DISNEY

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