

## 'Mulan' Reboot Is Beautiful, But Fails To Breathe New Life Into An Old Tale

NPR Fresh Air Fresh Air

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**Anchor:** Justin Chang

**Guests:** Donnie Yen, Liu Yifei

### Body

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DAVID BIANCULLI: This is FRESH AIR. Our film critic Justin Chang first saw the new Disney live-action drama "Mulan" at its Hollywood premiere back in March, a few weeks before it was originally scheduled to open in theaters around the world. But then the COVID-19 pandemic forced theaters to close. And after delaying the movie for months, the studio ultimately decided to release it as a premium streaming title for Disney+ subscribers. Here is Justin's review.

JUSTIN CHANG: I'm glad to have seen "Mulan" in a theater months ago. Having re-watched it recently at home from a digital screener, I can say that it isn't remotely the same experience. "Mulan," while far from a great movie, was clearly made for the big screen. The director, Niki Caro, doesn't skimp on spectacle. She handles the large-scale action sequences with flair. And she fills the frame with beautiful costumes and majestic landscapes, many of them from New Zealand, which stands in nicely for China. But I wish the movie's engagement with Chinese culture went deeper than that gorgeous surface, that it succeeded in breathing fresh dramatic life into this oft-told tale.

Many novelists, playwrights and filmmakers have already tackled the ancient folk legend of Hua Mulan, a warrior who famously disguised herself as a man and fought valiantly in the Chinese army. In addition to drawing inspiration from the epic poem "The Ballad Of Mulan," the movie is a live-action remake of Disney's charming 1998 animated film, "Mulan." But Caro strikes a more serious tone. There are no fast-talking dragons sidekicks here and no upbeat musical numbers. That's a bit of a shame, frankly. The stiffly earnest script could have used a little more showbiz pizzazz.

Still, I appreciate that unlike last year's "Lion King" remake, "Mulan" aspires to be more than an exact replica of the animated original. One crucial difference is that in this version of "Mulan," the protagonist is a naturally gifted warrior. When we meet her, she's already swinging a sword and leaping over the rooftops to the chagrin of her parents, who wish she would be a more traditionally subservient daughter and focus on finding a husband.

But Mulan, played by the Chinese American actress Liu Yifei, discovers her true purpose when China comes under attack by nomadic Rouran forces. Every family is ordered to send one man to fight in the Imperial Army. To spare her aging father, Mulan steals his sword and armor and takes his place, passing herself off as a man named Hua Jun. There she gets in a fight with a fellow soldier, and it falls to their commander to straighten them out.

(SOUNDBITE OF FILM, "MULAN")

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DONNIE YEN: (As Commander Tung) I'm your commanding officer. Fighting will not be tolerated. Am I clear?

LIU YIFEI: (As Mulan) Yes, Commander.

DONNIE YEN: (As Commander Tung) Where is your voice, soldier?

LIU YIFEI: (As Mulan) Yes, Commander.

DONNIE YEN: (As Commander Tung) Is this your family's sword?

LIU YIFEI: (As Mulan) It belongs to my father, Fa Zhou.

JUSTIN CHANG: The commander is nicely played by Donnie Yen, one of a few veteran actors cast in key supporting roles. Jet Li exudes beard-stroking gravitas as the Chinese emperor, while Jason Scott Lee gets some compelling layers to play as Bori Khan, the villainous leader of the Rouran army. Bori Khan is aided in battle by a powerful sorceress - that's the great Gong Li - who becomes the movie's most intriguing character. She could be Mulan's evil twin or perhaps a stealth ally, another woman fighting for her place in a man's army.

Caro has made previous movies about defying the patriarchy like "Whale Rider," and especially "North Country," her 2005 drama about a landmark sexual harassment lawsuit. "Mulan" continues in the same vein. Despite being the most gifted soldier in her regiment, Mulan must keep her identity a secret. Some gentle comedy ensues. Her inability to bathe with the other soldiers makes for an amusing running gag. But the movie is also serious about the consequences of her deception. Hiding the truth about who you are, it suggests, will ultimately limit your potential. That's a valuable lesson. The trouble is that the movie sometimes seems to be nothing but lessons, and once Mulan absorbs each one, circumstances tend to shift too swiftly in her favor.

Despite its PG-13 rating - a rarity for a Disney release - "Mulan" feels like a watered-down version of a potentially captivating story. It's not surprising to hear Chinese characters speaking stilted, accented English, which is standard practice for a Hollywood blockbuster set in an Asian country. I was more disappointed by how the script treats fairly intuitive cultural ideas about a person's chi and the importance of family honor as if they were difficult foreign concepts that needed to be repeatedly explained to the viewer.

Spinning a Chinese legend into family friendly entertainment with worldwide appeal is admittedly a tricky business these days, especially when a story about the distant past collides with present-day politics. "Mulan" already generated controversy after the lead actress, Liu Yifei, expressed support for the recent police crackdown in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, here in the U.S., the movie is being sold as a triumph of Asian representation, which does make its absence from theaters all the more disappointing. I wish you could see this movie on the big screen. I also wish it were better.

DAVID BIANCULLI: Justin Chang is the film critic for The LA Times.

On Monday's show, we pay tribute to saxophonist Sonny Rollins on the occasion of his 90th birthday. We feature our interview with him. And jazz critic Kevin Whitehead highlights Rollins' his career. And we hear from actress Octavia Spencer, who's been nominated for an Emmy for her performance in the Netflix series "Self-Made" about the first African American female self-made millionaire. I hope you can join us.

FRESH AIR's executive producer is Danny Miller. Our technical director and engineer is Audrey Bentham, with additional engineering support by Joyce Lieberman and Julian Herzfeld. Terry Gross, I'm David Bianculli.

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