

Mulan: A Dishonor to Us All

The Yale Herald: Yale University

October 8, 2020 Thursday

University Wire

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 1

Length: 1240 words

Body

When the live-action Mulan film was first announced in 2018, I was thrilled. Growing up, Mulan was my favorite Disney princess. She was someone who looked like me and faced the same challenges as me. After the unexpected success of *Crazy Rich Asians*, a movie with unprecedented Asian representation, I was excited for another film where I could see myself reflected on the screen.

Mulan boasts a star-studded cast, including big-name Hollywood actors such as Donnie Yen, Tzi Ma, Jason Scott Lee, Gong Li, and Jet Li. The film's titular role is portrayed by famous Chinese actress Yifei Liu. Following Liu's post on Chinese social media platform Weibo, #BoycottMulan briefly trended on Twitter, and the hashtag trended again in August after viewers noticed that the film's credits thank government bodies in Xinjiang, where Muslim Uighurs have been detained at internment camps.

Unlike its other live-action adaptation predecessors, *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, Mulan takes more creative liberties to differentiate itself from the 1998 animated film. Viewers will notice that fan-favorite characters like Mushu and the lucky cricket have been removed to produce a retelling of the "Ballad of Mulan" that is more authentic and culturally appropriate. But there are a few nods to the animated film: a soldier named Cricket who claims that he is lucky because he was born on an auspicious moon, song titles from the original soundtrack slipped into the script, and a cameo from Mulan's original voice actor, Ming Na Wen.

Overall, Mulan has much of the same plot. After the emperor decrees that each family must send one man to fight against the Rourans, a collective of tribes led by villain Böri Khan, who plans to invade China because the emperor killed his father. Hua Mulan steals her father's armor and sword to join the army, posing as Hua Jun. Alongside other recruits, Mulan trains while having to hide her true identity as a woman.

However, one major difference between the animated film and the live-action adaptation is 'chi', a supernatural power that everyone possesses but is not able to completely harness. Mulan has more control over her chi, making her a highly skilled and agile fighter. The film opens with a scene of a younger Mulan jumping over rooftops and performing stunts in order to catch a chicken. Mulan is criticized by the village people for publicly displaying her chi and not acting like a proper lady.

Although it's more accurate for Mulan to have been a skilled fighter before joining the army, the addition of chi detracts from the film. The animated film shows us how much Mulan struggled when she first joined the army, and when she eventually climbs to the top of the wooden pole, we cheer for her. This new version of Mulan simply

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levels up after a short discussion with Commander Tung, who asks her why she hides her chi. There's no rewarding growth after hard work-all Mulan had to do was channel her chi, something that none of us can relate to.

Another strange addition to this film is the villain Xianning, who works under Böri Khan to secure his invasion and capture the emperor. Xianning, played by Gong Li, is described as a "witch" because of her ability to control chi. The movie presents Xianning and Mulan as two sides of the same coin: both of them are women whom society cast aside because of their unnatural strength. However, Xianning tells Mulan that she gave up on the noble path, instead choosing to follow Böri Khan in the hope that he can give her the freedom to express herself. Their dialogue offers an uplifting message for young girls-but yet again, there is no connection with the audience. Both Mulan and Xianning are presented almost as Star Wars Jedi warriors gifted with the Force. When I was younger, I used to fling myself off the couch and attempt flips and kicks in the air because the animated film made me believe that I could become Mulan. The live-action Mulan tells us that you have to be chosen instead.

The film also struggles with establishing characters and their relationships. This issue stems from a poorly written screenplay that feels stilted and unnatural. When Mulan's father yells at her for not accepting her place as a woman in society, the outburst comes out of nowhere. Mulan's relationship with Honghui, played by newcomer Yoson An, is also extremely lacking. Honghui, a recruit in the Imperial Army, is supposed to be a replacement for Captain Li Shang, Mulan's romantic partner in the animated film. The removal of Shang in particular faced harsh social media backlash. According to film producer Jason T. Reed, Shang was removed due to the inappropriate power dynamic between him and Mulan. With the rise of the #MeTooMovement, he felt that it was wrong for Mulan to have a relationship with her commanding officer, especially considering real world implications.

Yet for two people who are supposedly love interests, Mulan and Honghui don't have enough substantial interaction or conversation for a platonic relationship. Their dialogue offers no development, and the scenes they're in together don't carry any weight. Sure, Honghui interacts with Mulan more than she does with any soldier, but that's it. And even when Honghui stands up for Mulan after she reveals her true identity, it seems forced, because there's no way to see how their friendship progressed to that point. At the end, all we're left with is a vague moment on a bridge where Honghui tells Mulan that she can't leave the army after saving China. Is he implying that he doesn't want her to leave? Probably, but who could say why. Whether a dull script or their lack of chemistry as a pair is to blame, I wasn't impressed.

But my main issue with Mulan lies with its production team. Besides the cast, the production team was largely composed of white people. Even worse, the director, Niki Caro, and all four screenwriters, are white. Without input from people who truly understand Chinese culture, how did they expect the movie to feel genuine? Both Chinese audiences and Chinese-American audiences alike have criticized Mulan for being too Westernized, and rightfully so. In the Chinese period dramas that my parents watched, I marveled at fight scenes where people were suspended in the air like gravity didn't exist, and I shuddered in fear as they leapt from rooftop to rooftop without tumbling down. While the film does incorporate well-choreographed fight scenes similar to the ones I watched when I was younger, Mulan is so clearly Chinese culture seen through a Western lens. For example, while it's true that filial piety is highly valued in Chinese culture, it is not the only value. There is no nuanced understanding of who Mulan is supposed to be: a fiercely independent woman who wants to bring honor to her family and to herself. This isn't to say that the screenwriters of Mulan are unskilled. They just don't have the experiences needed to bring Mulan's identity struggles to life. It is not enough to have inclusive casting-the people who work behind the camera must also have a rich knowledge of the project for it to resonate with audiences.

If you really want to watch Mulan, be my guest. But if you know you're going to compare it to the animated film the entire time, do yourself a favor and watch that instead. Even though it's not as culturally accurate, 2D Mulan is a more emotionally fulfilling experience than 3D Mulan will ever be.

Load-Date: October 9, 2020