

Mulan. Directed by Niki Caro, performances by Liu Yifei, Jet Li, Donnie Yen, Yoson An, Gong Li, and Jason Scott Lee, Walt Disney Pictures, 2020.

Valerie L. Guyant

Nostalgia, a wistful emotionally charged yearning for happiness that is connected to a former time or place is a generally accepted marketing practice that works best when it targets an age demographic with a disposable income on an emotional level. This is true for “throwback” versions of Pepsi or Nike and the wistful use of old commercials that sometimes see a new circulation for brief periods. Nostalgia is probably most powerful, and most lucrative, when it is applied to a childhood memory, product, or piece of entertainment.

It is the reason, for instance, that we saw a movie version of *The Brady Bunch* roughly twenty years after the television show ended, and why *The Addams Family* (1964-1966), which was in regular afterschool rotation in the 1970s, saw a film version released in 1991 and then an animated version in 2019. A rotation of twenty to thirty years leads to children of any one version developing a sense of nostalgia and also wanting to share what they think they remember of that experience with a younger generation, which drives a revenue stream.

Walt Disney Corporation, which clearly understands this marketing strategy, has always engaged in a relatively consistent recirculation and reinvention of their films; beginning with the use of fairy tales that people remembered as bedtime stories and reinventing them for a new medium, following with rereleases on video cassette and (eventually) DVD and, more recently, through re-imaginings of animated films into live action undertakings. *Beauty and the Beast*

(1991; 2017) was the first in the most recent round of nostalgia driven Disney movies, but *Mulan* was certainly not far behind.

Unlike other fairytale-based Disney movies, *Mulan* is based on a Chinese folksong, less well-known for many Western audiences, even though the *Ballad of Mulan* was in print since at least the 12th century and was likely part of an oral history since the fourth century. In the original, Mulan returns from war after over a decade of maintaining her identity as a male warrior, and there is no hint of dishonor or of romance. Over the next thousand years, a number of changes slowly occurred, including the addition of those elements, and, in one variation, Mulan committing suicide rather than becoming a concubine.

Then, in 1998, *Mulan* was Disneyfied; music was added, a talking good luck dragon was added, and romance was emphasized, but the message that a woman could save an empire through persistence and dedication remained. Captain Li Shang singing “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” and Eddie Murphy’s over the top rendition of Mushu were popular with the intended audience of the animated film, as was the romance between Shang and Mulan. However, none of these popular elements make an appearance in the live action remake. Viewers anticipating the delight of a nostalgia driven viewing will, therefore, be disappointed. The basic plot line still exists, of course – Mulan, who does not easily meet expectations for fulfilling her role as a daughter, takes her father’s place when the Emperor issues a conscription decree in order to keep him safe, a portion of the film is spent on the training, during which Mulan’s secret is nearly discovered, a battle ensues and then a rush to the Imperial palace to save the Emperor, Mulan is offered a place of honor but requests permission to return home, and her family welcomes her back.

Essentially, the positive parts of the film include its gorgeous cinematography, with references to the *wuxia* cinematic tradition. *Wuxia* literally translates as martial chivalry but is a genre that blends swords, sorcery, and chivalry. *Wuxia* makes use of sweeping, expansive shots, blends sword fighting and martial arts in action sequences, and often utilizes wire-fu (an augmentation of stunt work through using wires and pulleys). In *Mulan*, the most obvious uses of wire-fu are Mulan's race across the tops of buildings while following the hawk version of Xianniang and Böri Khan's soldiers scaling the walls of fortresses and palaces with fluid impossibility. Additionally, *wuxia* focuses on the attainment of personal freedom, often through a better understanding of their authentic selves and the message that being true to oneself rather than pretending to be something we are not has its own power. There is also a clear message of devotion to family being as important as honor. Personally, I found the lack of a heavy romantic element to be a positive development as well.

However, there are a number of concerns regarding this film, two of which are external to the film itself. There was some controversy regarding statements made by Yifei Liu in support of Hong Kong police regarding their behavior during pro-democracy protests. More controversy emerged when it was revealed that parts of the movie were filmed in Xinjiang, where several political indoctrination centers exist that target Muslim Uyghurs. However, these issues have been discussed by far more authoritative voices elsewhere and interested readers should listen to those voices. Suffice it to say that Disney's lack of concern for human rights violations may prevent many from seeing the film at all.

Regarding the film itself though, there are several issues worth noting, especially given Disney's publicity campaign that insisted *Mulan* was going to be an authentic adaptation of the original ballad rather than the 1998 film. There are several differences from the animated

version, of course, and the absence of fireworks, while disappointing to some fans, does not make that list.

What is on that list though is that Mulan herself is changed. In the animated film, Mulan has no special abilities, has never trained in any fashion, and works hard to become a better warrior in order to protect her family. In the live action film, the viewer is told within the first few moments that Mulan has fighting prowess. She is shown to be exemplary compared to all the male soldiers, and she therefore has less of a discernible character arch. Also, a significant difference is the inclusion of Xianniang, a shapeshifting witch working with Böri Khan in his effort to defeat the Emperor and exact revenge for his father's death. Her fate at the end of the movie emphasizes a stereotypical female sacrifice redemption path.

Niki Caro is a New Zealand based film director, Bina Daigeler is from Munich, Germany, Elizabeth Martin and Lauren Hynek originated the writing for the film, and Amanda Silver and her husband Rick Jaffa added their writing skills as well. On the surface, it is refreshing to see so many female voices helping to bring this story to light. However, the film is constructed to create a “not like other girls” vibe and even a cursory understanding of Chinese culture highlights how little the creative team seemed to worry about some semblance of accuracy. Qi (chi) is misrepresented as being something women cannot or should not access despite the real beliefs about it flowing through everyone. Neither witches nor this type of phoenix is culturally correct. It would have made more sense for the ancestral guardian to have been a dragon, even if we never heard a Mushu-esque voice. Most importantly, an easy adaptation would be to have Xianniang be a bird spirit or other supernatural entity, preferably also the non-redeemed villain of the film.

Bottom line is *Mulan* is enjoyable to watch if you do not overanalyze, do not care about cultural misrepresentation, and do not mind the Mary Sue trope of your heroine being devoid of any weakness or fault. It is beautifully crafted, and the acting is exemplary, but the themes are bland, conservative, and flawed.

Works Cited

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