

For Netflix's live-action Avatar to work, Zuko had to find his heart a little faster

The original *Avatar: The Last Airbender* series was three seasons long, developing its arcs patiently over 61 episodes. That allowed it a slowburn approach to exploring characters like Prince Zuko, whose emotional interiority played a huge role in making his trajectory so satisfying to watch. But one of the first things people are going to notice about Netflix's new live-action *Avatar* adaptation – which is much shorter at eight episodes – is how much more quickly it starts to unpack the origins of Zuko's rage and pull back the steely emotional mask he wears to hide his feelings from the world.

The shorter runtime of Netflix's *Avatar* makes it difficult to revisit every single plot point that made the original show great. That's part of why many characters, like Zuko – portrayed by Dallas Liu – feel a little different even as you're seeing them in pivotal moments ripped right from the cartoon. The new Zuko is still a temperamental hothead whose dark family history keeps him from being able to see the Fire Nation's fascism for what it is. But from the very first episode, you can also plainly see a lot of the pain, fear, and uncertainty roiling inside him, which were all things the original took longer to tease out.

When I spoke with Liu recently, he explained that as much as the new *Avatar*'s creative team wanted to do right by the original show, the changes made to his Zuko were all meant to

present him as a more dynamic, human-feeling foil to the core group of heroes. “Our Zuko is pretty similar to the original animated series, but we give him a little more depth beyond being this rageful, angry character,” Liu told me via Zoom. “I wanted to make this Zuko feel like a real person with real anger as opposed to a guy throwing temper tantrums, which was often what it felt like in the original show early on.”

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dark:[>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63”>Dallas Liu as Prince Zuko
and Paul Sun-Hyung Lee as Iroh.*