Review: Sumptuously reimagined Mulan turns Disney princess into a true warrior

reader comments

124 with 79 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
Liu Yifei stars as Hua Mulan in Disney's live action remake of *Mulan*.
I'm on record as not being a huge fan of Disney's live-action remakes, but *Mulan*, the studio's live-action remake of the 1998 animated film, is a welcome exception to that personal sentiment. This isn't just a lazy frame-by-frame copycat of the original (looking at you, live action *The Lion King*). Part historical drama and part superhero origin story, it's an inventive re-imagining that owes as much to the Chinese source material as to its animated predecessor, transforming the character from a feisty tomboyish Disney princess into a fierce, true warrior.

(Some spoilers below the gallery.)

As I've noted previously, both films are based on the Chinese legend "The Ballad of Hua Mulan," which tells the story of a young woman in the Northern Wei era (spanning 386-536 CE) who takes her father's place when each family is required to provide one male to serve in the emperor's army. In this version, Hua Mulan is already a well-trained fighter, and she serves for 12 years, although the ballad skips over the

details of her military exploits. When she finally returns home, she removes her uniform and meets her war comrades as a woman, who express astonishment that they had never suspected. Mulan explains that if you just see a rabbit in a field, you can't tell whether it's male or female.

Disney's animated film broadly followed the traditional storyline, except Mulan is not well-trained when she first runs away. The film also added a love interest, a lucky cricket, a goofy dragon representative of the family ancestors named Mushu (hilariously voiced by Eddie Murphy), and a catchy original soundtrack. *Mulan* was released to critical acclaim, grossing $304 million worldwide and earning Golden Globe and Oscar nominations. (It should be noted, however, that Chinese audiences didn't much care for Disney's vision, dismissing it as too Westernized. It only grossed $1.3 million in that region.)

This new live-action version, directed by Niki Caro (*Whale Rider*), also preserves the traditional storyline, although it eschews the goofy, family-friendly humor and musical numbers in favor of a more serious tone. While some fans might miss those elements—there's been a lot of hand-wringing over the exclusion of Mushu, for instance, because Chinese audiences really didn't like the character—Caro has skillfully woven in nods to the animated film in her own interpretation of the legend. That includes the songs: their musical phrasing wafts throughout the elegant soundtrack composed by Harry Gregson Williams. Per the official premise:

> *When the Emperor of China issues a decree that one man per family must serve in the Imperial Army to defend the country from Northern invaders, Hua Mulan (Liu Yifei, The Forbidden Kingdom), the eldest daughter of an honored warrior, steps in to take the place of her ailing father. Masquerading as a man, Hua Jun, she is tested every step of the way and must harness her inner-strength and embrace her true potential. It is an epic journey that will transform her into an honored*

warrior and earn her the respect of a grateful nation…and a proud father.

- Hua Mulan (Liu Yifei) tries to be the perfect woman.
- The picture of Chinese womanhood, at least on the surface.
  YouTube/Disney
- She just doesn’t have a knack for traditional skills.
  YouTube/Disney
- There are other ways to espouse the virtue of graceful elegance.
  YouTube/Disney
- Böri Khan (Jason Scott Lee) seeks to avenge his father’s death.
  YouTube/Disney
- Böri Khan with his witchy sidekick Xian Lang (Gong Li).
  YouTube/Disney
- Jet Li plays the emperor.
  YouTube/Disney
- Hua Zhou (Tzi Ma), Mulan’s father, has no sons and offers himself to serve once more in the emperor’s army.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan, her mother Hua Li (Rosalind Chao), and sister Hua Xiu (Xana Tang) are dismayed.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan rides off to take her father’s place.
  YouTube/Disney
- Training up new recruits to defend the emperor and China.
  YouTube/Disney
- A show of manliness.
  YouTube/Disney
- Hua Zhou prays to the family ancestors to keep his daughter safe.
  YouTube/Disney
- The Northern army attacks.

YouTube/Disney

- Xian Lang is a fierce fighter in her own right.
  YouTube/Disney
- Game face: on.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan takes aim.
  YouTube/Disney
- The two armies prepare to do battle.
  YouTube/Disney
- Xian Lang parries Mulan’s sword.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan has come into her own, as a warrior and a woman.

The film starts off slowly, lingering over every exquisitely realized detail. Frankly, the script lays on the shaming of Mulan for not being womanly enough pretty thick in the earliest scenes. (We get it, ancient China was a big-time patriarchy.) But this awkwardness fades, and quite quickly. The cinematography, stunt work, and costume design are breathtaking, and Caro teases out powerful performances from her actors, which include some well-known names in Asian cinema.

Caro has incorporated several classic scenes from the 1998 film: Mulan chasing a rogue chicken into the family temple, creating havoc; the disastrous meeting with a matchmaker; an army training montage; the interruption of Mulan’s midnight bathing while hiding her identity; and Mulan setting off an avalanche to defeat Böri Khan (Jason Scott Lee, *The Jungle Book*) and his invading Roaran warriors. These are not slavish recreations; Caro has added her own touch to the scenes, slightly tweaking some, while others are more significantly altered.

“Qi is for boys”

Perhaps the biggest difference from the 1998 version is that

this Mulan isn't just your average tomboy from a rural village. She has a super power: especially strong qi (or ch'i), a vital life force energy in Chinese philosophy that permeates everything. Those with strong qi, who can learn to channel it, make for fierce, skilled warriors. But as Mulan's father, Hua Zhou (Tzi Ma, *Rush Hour, Man in the High Castle*) reluctantly tells her, "Qi is for boys. It is time to hide your gift away." Girls who exhibit those gifts are shunned as witches.

Mulan also has a sister, Hua Xiu (Xana Tang), and Caro introduces a shapeshifting witch named Xian Lang (Gong Li, *Memoirs of a Geisha, Curse of the Golden Flower*), who was once just like Mulan: a young girl with very strong qi who was exiled for not conforming to traditional womanly ideals. These two characters may derive from the *Sui Tang Romance*, a 17th-century tragic novel based on the Mulan legend, in which Mulan has a younger sister and bonds with a fellow female warrior named Xianniang.

Mulan's love interest in the 1998 film, Li Shang, has been split into two characters: Commander Tung (Donnie Yen, who played Chirrut Imwe in *Rogue One*), head of the Imperial Army, and a fellow recruit, Chen Honghui (Yoson An, *Mortal Engines, Mega Time Squad*). According to co-producer Jason T. Reed, there was consensus that having Mulan's commanding officer also be her love interest just didn't play well in 2020, and I think it was a good decision. Yen is terrific as Tung, who spots Mulan's strong qi right away and chides her for not cultivating it (granted, he still thinks she's a man).

[embedded content]
Disney's *Mulan*: "A Tale of Many" Featurette.
The animated film's lucky cricket is now a human character named Cricket (Jun Yu, *Fresh Off the Boat*): another fellow recruit who was born under an auspicious moon, per his mother, and is thus deemed to be lucky. And instead of Mushu, Mulan is aided by the spirit of a glorious phoenix—the Hua family

emissary for their ancestors. The phoenix symbolizes harmony and is the yin to the dragon's yang in Chinese philosophy, which makes it a fitting symbolic ally for Mulan.

Xian Lang is an inspired addition to the story, particularly since Khan is such a one-dimensional villain (he was in the 1998 film, too, but it was less noticeable in that cartoonish setting). She seeks a place where her powers will be celebrated rather than vilified; hence her uneasy alignment with Khan. He has promised her that place in exchange for helping him take down the Emperor (Jet Li, *The One, Lethal Weapon 4*), but he does not accept or respect her, at one point deriding her as a "curbed dog."

She is Mulan's dark reflection, akin to Harry Potter and Voldemort, or Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader—except Xian Lang has a far more compelling sales pitch when she urges Mulan to join forces with her, arguing that she will never be accepted into Chinese culture. "I was a girl just like you when they turned on me," Xian Lang tells Mulan. "The more power I showed, the more I was crushed. We are the same." Gong Li's portrayal matches Liu Yifei's luminous performance as Mulan; they play off one another beautifully, making their interactions among the film's most memorable moments.

"One warrior knows another"

That shift in focus does come at a cost: there is less emphasis on Mulan bonding with and ultimately earning the respect of her comrades in arms: Chen, Cricket, Ling (Jimmy Wong, *John Dies at the End*), Chien-Po (Doua Moua, *Gran Torino*), and Yao (Chen Tang, *Warrior, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). It was a particularly fun element of the 1998 film, but Caro is going for something different here. Mulan is not trying to "be a man"; she's learning how to be the best version of herself.

The 1998 animated *Mulan* is hands-down my favorite animated

Disney film (excluding films by Pixar). But it always bugged me that, for all her accomplishments, when Mulan returns home at last, her mother and grandmother are much more thrilled when Li Shang shows up—presumably to propose (at the emperor's urging). Marriage is always the true ultimate goal for any Disney princess, after all. But Caro's Mulan is a bona fide warrior; her ending is far more ambiguous, and the better for being so.

Thematically, *Mulan* is not about defying unfair gender stereotypes or overthrowing the patriarchy. It's about having the freedom to be true to ourselves and to cultivate our unique gifts. But it's also about having others recognize those gifts and accept us for who we really are—hence its broad popular appeal. "One warrior knows another," Hua Zhou tells his daughter when she returns home to seek his forgiveness for running away. "You were always there, yet I see you for the first time."

Sniff. Yeah. Something in my eye.

Like many other films this year, *Mulan* shifted its release date multiple times because of the coronavirus pandemic, before finally opting for a streaming release. The film is currently available for a $30 premium purchase to Disney+ subscribers. It will get a theatrical run in territories where the streaming platform is not available. *Mulan* will become available free of charge to all Disney+ subscribers on December 4, 2020. And I wouldn't be surprised if Disney greenlit a broader theatrical run sometime in the future, when the current global crisis has passed. This is a film I would love to see on the big screen.

Listing image by YouTube/Disney

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1703251