CULTURAL COMMENT

THE NEW “MULAN” ’S UNCOMFORTABLE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA’S PAST AND PRESENT

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Disney’s new, live-action “Mulan,” which has sparked international calls for a boycott, is an Americanized celebration of Chinese nationalism. Photograph by Jasin Boland / Disney

Early in Maxine Hong Kingston’s book “The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts,” from 1976, the narrator asks, “What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” “The Woman Warrior” is told from the perspective of a second-generation Chinese-American girl, growing up amid her Chinese immigrant mother’s ghost stories. She comes to understand her history by narrating the fifteen-hundred-year-old legend of Fa Mu Lan, the folk hero who fought in her aging father’s stead out of filial duty. Mu Lan’s story has been told and retold in China, and, starting with Kingston’s novel, it circulated widely in America as well, most prominently in a Disney animated version, released in 1998. The new, live-action “Mulan,” which recently premièred on the Disney+ streaming platform, begins by acknowledging its predecessors. “There have been many tales about the great warrior Mulan,” its opening voice-over says, “but ancestors: this one is mine.”

Oddly, perhaps, “Mulan,” directed by the New Zealander Niki Caro and credited to four screenwriters, gives the voice-over a body in Mulan’s father. Although most Americans associate the folktale with its proto-feminist heroine, this movie is framed as her father’s story—he is the film’s definitive narrator. It is not the only dissonance in the new “Mulan.” The film is, put crudely, an Americanized celebration of Chinese nationalism, on a two-hundred-million-dollar budget. In the film, a courageous Chinese imperial army fights and defeats the proto-Mongol invaders—a triumph of border control. Offscreen, Liu Yifei, the Chinese actress who portrays Mulan, has openly supported the Hong Kong police against protesters; her stance clashes with her portrayal of a feminist underdog and has galvanized boycott campaigns, including one by the #MilkTeaAlliance, a cohort of pro-democracy

activists in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan. When the twenty-three-year-old activist Agnes Chow was detained in Hong Kong, a meme took flight anointing her as "the real Mulan." And, this week, viewers of the film noticed that the credits offer thanks to government agencies in Xinjiang, where parts of "Mulan" were filmed, and where hundreds of thousands of Uighur Muslims have been held in internment camps. (At one point, a title card presents "Northwest China"—that is, Xinjiang—as "an inalienable part of China that Mulan must defend for her father, her family, and her emperor," as Jeannette Ng writes in *Foreign Policy*. "That's not the historical reality—or even the reality of the original poem the stories are based on.")

No one could have foreseen that Liu, the film's star, would create so much P.R. grief. Disney reportedly auditioned more than a thousand actresses before settling on Liu, who was born in Wuhan and lived in Queens for part of her childhood, as exactly what we want our contemporary female superheroes to be: quietly courageous, uninterested in sex, and possessed of perfectly blown-out hair that somehow never gets in her eyes, even when she's shooting arrows or briskly mounting horses. When she transitions from her male persona into "Hua Mulan," the film tracks her in slow motion as she undoes her bun, wavy locks cascading, armor falling away: she is Oriental Wonder Woman. If only

she weren't played by a supporter of police brutality.

It is somewhat customary for adaptations of "Mulan" to rework the heroine's filial piety into national commitment. The Shanghai film "Mulan Joins the Army," from 1939, made during Japan's occupation of China, became a popular sensation and launched the actress Chen Yunshang into national stardom. (As Weihong Bao writes in her book "Fiery Cinema," the film caused its own controversy: during a screening in 1940, in Chongqing, Nationalist China's wartime capital, audience members stormed the projection room and set the reels on fire.) In 1964, the famous Shaw Brothers Studio, in Hong Kong, made a musical version titled "Lady General Hua Mulan," which instructed residents of Hong Kong, which the British had recently colonized, to remember their Chinese roots. These films were often exported to America for a Chinese-American diasporic community, including San Francisco's Chinatown. Before Disney tried to export Mulan back to Chinese audiences, China was already sending its Mulan remakes to Chinese-Americans.

Some of these Chinese film versions of "Mulan" as the literary critic Colleen Lye has argued, likely influenced Kingston's "The Woman Warrior," which conveyed the myth to an American readership in the political context of the Cultural Revolution. (Disclosure: Lye is my academic adviser.) Initially marketed as a memoir based on Kingston's own girlhood, "Warrior" bends and blurs genres, incorporating Mu Lan's mythical upbringing into Kingston's own autobiographical narration. The early section "White Tigers" opens by explaining how Mu Lan enters the narrator's imagination through a range of sources, and, incidentally, doubles as a fairly accurate description of the opening scene in the live-action "Mulan":

> Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. And on Sundays, from noon to midnight, we went to the movies at the Confucius Church. We saw

swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill; they didn't even need a running start.

"The Woman Warrior" is arguably still Asian-America's definitive text, with Mulan framed as its orienting plot for the Asian-American experience. In the decades following its publication, it was one of the single most-taught books in American colleges. David Henry Hwang's first play, "F.O.B.," which premièred at the Public, in 1980, centered the Mu Lan of Kingston's book specifically as a Chinese-American, not Chinese, literary character. Kingston herself expected the book to be read in largely political terms, "from the women's lib angle and the Third World angles, the *Roots* angle," as she put it. If Disney's "Mulan" feels ideologically overburdened today, so, too, was Kingston's fictional one when it was published. The intergenerational mother-daughter plot stages a central dynamic of contrast and contradiction, which was key to Mao's vision for China's revolutionary future. And although China's influence on far-left politics in America might feel distant today, in the mid-seventies, the notion of radical American politics borrowing from Maoist revolutionaries was still fresh in readers' minds.

Much of the discussion around the live-action "Mulan" has focussed on its COVID-19-induced straight-to-streaming distribution model, and how it might affect the film's clear ambitions for the box-office in China, where theatres have reopened. The animated version bombed when it arrived in China, in 1999, at a time when Disney badly needed a hit: in 1997, Martin Scorsese's "Kundun," about the Dalai Lama, who is exiled from Tibet, ruffled enough feathers that the Chinese Communist Party began to pull much of its business with Disney. When they relented by permitting the release of "Mulan," Disney hoped that the film might function as a kind of peace offering, appealing specifically to China's nationalist interests. Yet while the movie enjoyed worldwide success—dubbed into thirty-five languages and popularizing the myth at an unprecedented scale—it failed in mainland China, where it was seen as an overly slapstick and Americanized perversion of Mulan's story. It grossed only

one-sixth of its anticipated box-office revenue there—a mere $1.3 million.

In appealing to today’s Chinese market, the Disney+ version has leaned toward something like magical realism—no one sings in this rendition, though falcons do transform into women warriors—but nothing like historical accuracy: those tulou houses in the trailer are about a thousand years out of date. The movie is pure commodity, but, then again, so are most movies. This commodity might have been easier to sell, though, if it had connected with anything that makes the Mulan myth so vital to twentieth-century Chinese political history.

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