

Mulan

Mulan, 1998, USA

Film Overview



Solid entertainment from a new group of Disney animators. The story source is a Chinese fable about a young girl who disguises herself as a man to help her family and her country. When the Huns attack China, a call to arms goes out to every village, and Mulan's father, being the only man in the family, accepts the call. Mulan has just made a disastrous appearance at the Matchmaker and decides to challenge society's expectations that she become a bride. She steals her father's conscription notice, cuts her hair, and impersonates a man to join the army. She goes to boot camp, learning to fit in with the other soldiers with some help from her sidekick, Mushu, a wise-cracking dragon. She trains, and soon faces the Huns eye-to-eye to protect her Emperor.

The film is gorgeous to look at, with a superior blend of classic and computer-generated animation. Directors Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook make the best of it: a battle in the snowy mountains is as thrilling as the best Hollywood action films. The menacing Huns are not cute but simple and bad. The wickedness is subtle, not disturbing. The film is not a full-fledged musical, as it has only five songs (the best, "Be a Man," is sung during boot camp). The story is strong, and Mulan goes right to the top of Disney animated heroines; she has the right stuff. *-Adapted from Doug Thomas's review on Amazon.com*

Culture Notes

- **The legend behind the film** The Chinese legend of Hua Mulan centers on a young woman who disguises herself as a man to take the place of her elderly father in the army. The story can be traced back to *The Ballad of Mulan*. Disney's *Mulan* casts the title character in much the same way as the original legend, a tomboy daughter of a respected veteran, somewhat troubled by not being the "sophisticated lady" her society expects her to be. In the original Mulan legend, Mulan uses her father's name Li and she was never discovered as a girl, unlike the film. The film also uses the Cantonese pronunciation of her family name, "Fa," though it is set in north China, where Mandarin is spoken.
- **Hua Mulan (2009)** In 2009, director Jingle Ma directed a Chinese live-action adaptation of the same legend. It stars actress Zhao Wei as Mulan and differs vastly from the Disney animated film, adhering more to the director's imagination.
- **Mulan's fake name** When Mulan masquerades as a man, her name is a pun in Chinese. Her first name is "Ping" (瓶), meaning vase, and her surname (given first as is normal in Chinese) means Flower (花). Together they make "Flowerpot", a Chinese term meaning eye candy, decorate-only things or persons, something or someone who has got the gift of appearance (usually i.e. a woman or a product etc.) or gab (i.e. a person), but has no wisdom or ability or practical utility. But in Chinese dub versions, they chose to use "平" (flat, peace, safe, etc.) for "Ping" instead of "瓶" (vase), to avoid the phrase's derogatory sense.
- **Chinese Dragons** are legendary creatures in Chinese mythology and folklore, with mythic counterparts among Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Turkic dragons. In Chinese art, dragons are typically portrayed as long, scaled, serpentine creatures with four legs. In contrast to European dragons that are considered evil,



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Chinese dragons traditionally symbolize potent and auspicious powers, particularly control over water, rainfall, and floods. (*Wikipedia*.) Originally, Disney didn't like the idea of putting in a dragon as a companion for Mulan; they feared it would be too big and menacing. San Souci explained to them that in Chinese lore, dragons can be any size, so a small dragon was approved. Thus, Mushu was born. (*IMDB.com*)

- **How Chinese is it?** Several reviews warn viewers to remember that Disney's *Mulan* is, everything else aside, an American film. When shown in China, it performed abysmally, being "too American." The film does not adhere strictly to the legend; the timeline for the story, while already baffled in the original story, seems even more inconsistent in the film—it prominently features landmarks such as the Forbidden City, which was not constructed until the 15th century during the Ming dynasty. On the other hand, at the time of Northern Wei, the Xiongnu (Huns) had been already absorbed into Chinese culture. However, according to the style of dress, the film takes place sometime in the 15th century or before. The fireworks featured in the movie indicate that the movie is set during the Sui dynasty. However, there are some significant details in the film's favor: the art style is meant to imitate Chinese painting, a decision made after some of the film's artistic supervisors spent three weeks in China for inspiration. Details such as food and clothing (similar the Japanese *kimono* only because Japan was highly influenced by Tang China) were very accurate. *Adapted from Wikipedia*

