

Chapter
05

Panel Discussion:
The Live Action
***Mulan* (2020) and**
Disney's Approach to
Racial Diversity

Michelle Anya Anjirbag, Bertha Chin
and Jingan Young

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This discussion was put together by the editor via social media and conducted on Zoom in April 2021 and has been edited for clarity and length. Its intention was to address issues of racial representation and diversity in Disney's works, as well as fan reaction to the recent live action adaptations of some of Disney's classic and renaissance-animated films. Rather than a single-authored chapter, a panel made possible to include several voices, which is why we opted for this form. A longer version also addressing Aladdin (2019) can be found online on this book's website.

Sabrina Mittermeier (SM): *Mulan* has been the most heatedly discussed live action adaptation that Disney has released over the last decade. Issues arose surrounding its production context, casting, distribution strategies and the geopolitical moment it arrived in. Let's start by talking about production first.

Jingan Young (JY): I initially wrote an article for the *Guardian* in 2019 after the first trailer dropped. The excitement for it was palpable, because the original film meant so much to so many people. It came out in 1998, so I was 7- or 8-years-old and growing up in Hong Kong, pre the 1997 handover, the film represented a type of zeitgeist, of East-meets-West and it became representative of first- and second-generation immigrants, both in the USA and in Southeast Asia. *Mulan* was a symbol for this fractured community, particularly Mainland Chinese families (like my own) who fled Mao's China before and during the Cultural Revolution. There was a lot riding on it. Even before the trailer launched it was this big, flashy vehicle, it was going to be the most expensive live action Disney remake. Sadly, I was underwhelmed with the trailer because it reminded me of Chinese television series set in Imperial China. There was something off about it, so I wrote about that disconnect.

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Bertha Chin (BC): I remember the discussion surrounding the omission of the dragon when the trailer dropped. A lot of people were disappointed it was less like the other remakes, for instance the *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) or *Aladdin* (2019), that were a play-by-play remake of the animated versions, with their magical elements. So why omit the dragon from this huge multi-billion dollar investment? When I first watched the trailer I thought, I'm going to give it a chance, not trying to make a judgement before I saw it. But I didn't feel anything about it, it was just like any other martial arts film, like any other film coming out of China. Obviously China and Hong Kong have produced several versions of the Mulan story, and kept modernizing it. So, there are a lot of other choices available in a global media context. I was lukewarm to the idea of yet another remake.

Michelle Anya Anjirbag (MA): I also remember those conversations about the omission of Mushu, people being very upset that it was not going to be this musical production. And they had tried to get a remake in production since about 2010, but originally it was going to feature a white male saviour figure as the main hero. There was some *nonsense* – let's call it that – going on at the production level, in terms of what's the point of retelling the same story that's been so beloved by communities globally since 1998. What's the point of changing it, while also selling authenticity, but then also whitewashing it. But with the trailer it was clear it was changing the entire aesthetic and feel of it, a departure from the animated version that for me is very camp, fun, very girl power, very American. I didn't really have high hopes. On the other hand, the actual photography, the soundscape, the landscapes in it are beautiful – it's aesthetically beautiful. But as a cohesive whole, there are a lot of problems with it, even divorced from political context, which I don't think you can do. As a film it doesn't hang together. It's one of those cases where it's not enough to take a bunch of big names, and throw a lot of money at it, and expect it to work. This was Disney's biggest movie and the money was given to a female producer and a female director, but there wasn't any cultural competency there. And this shows that even in 2020, Disney still does not understand cultural competency and production.

BC: And there was this idea that Disney was trying to globalize, it had already envisioned itself as this globalized conglomerate. Marvel has been trying to

capture this huge Chinese audience, and failed miserably. They kept adding Chinese actresses here and there, which doesn't serve any purpose at all, other than going, 'look, we have this person who is famous in China, we hope that will mean we can break into this market.' But as you said, Michelle, the film looks beautiful, but it really also looks like any other martial arts film coming out of China, even with proper choreography. Adding Donnie Yen to it gives a certain authenticity to the martial arts scenes. When I watched it I was really confused as to who it was aiming for: a Chinese, global or American audience? The animated version has things like talking animals, the magical elements, you expect it to be unreal, a fantasy, even though it's based on a famous ballad. But with the live action, it was just confusing to me, and I think they were confused as well, with the way it was marketed, the way it was made.

JY: It was also interesting when the publicity machine geared up in the summer of 2019, despite the release being pushed back again and again. There was a great article in *The Hollywood Reporter* with the film's director Niki Caro and actress Liu Yifei who plays Mulan, where they talk about what they went through regarding censorship from the beginning pre-production. According to this interview, they were advised by the Chinese government's propaganda department on the screenplay – which, yes, is a normal process, they also did this with all the Marvel films, specifically, if you want to shoot or release a film in China, you have to jump through these bureaucratic hoops. They apparently sacrificed the final romantic kiss; at the end there's a scene where Mulan is with the 'male romantic lead' [...] where they almost kiss. Omitting that was actually an active choice on behalf of the production team and the Chinese censors. There were more reparations made undoubtedly, and this speaks to this being a bad film: you can see how it is trying to toe the party line and this impacts negatively on the final cultural product, having to make all those sacrifices and compromises. Watching it is kind of jarring, and I do think the editing [...] is also terrible.

MA: Regarding not knowing who it's for: what I picked up on from the marketing was that angle of 'this is authentic, it's going to be more true to the ballad, it's not the Disneyfied version of Mulan, we are trying to reflect real Chinese culture'. So, for me, the addition of this idea of Qi, this version of magic that's never fully explained or explored, was weird. Watching Mulan as a little girl it

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was important that she wasn't special, she just was determined. She wanted to do what was right for her family, and she went forward and she tried really hard. Yes, she had a dragon sidekick, but it's not Mushu who gets her through her training, he doesn't make her who she is. And now in this version she has this innate power, she is different from other people, and I was very curious about this choice. Honestly, there's a Disney Channel original movie called *Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior* (2006) which handles this stuff better in terms of giving it cultural grounding and explaining it.

JY: *Qi* just means living things, living metabolism, it's in everything and in everyone. So, to make it about exceptionalism is a bizarre, American take, but it's also autocratic exceptionalism, it's a hodgepodge. You are the representation of an autocratic society, you're going to serve the kingdom, but you're also an individual with your own intelligence and your own power – but she already got power, and who knows how she got it, the beginning of the film doesn't clarify.

BC: That was the part of the film where I was like 'oh my God, what am I watching'. It felt like they were turning it into a superhero narrative. That's how she survived the training, that's how she's able to battle the witch, who is what happens when you misuse this power, the 'welcome to the dark side' kind of thing, this *Star Wars*-reference. But if I had wanted that, I would have just watched *Star Wars*, or any Marvel film. To me this just furthers this idea of 'look, it's this exotic culture, and it's so exotic that we have to give her this superpower, this mystical *Qi* that we're not even going to explain to viewers who may not know what it is'. Superhero stories usually have origin stories, and this one doesn't even have that. For me being Southeast Asian, even though I am ethnically Chinese, I wouldn't know much about *Qi*, because that is not my culture. So even to me it really frames it as this exotic culture. It's like this assumption that everyone who is Chinese or Asian knows Kung-Fu.

SM: What struck me with the opening monologue, this voice over by her father, also points to her not being a man, or a son, and yet she has this *Qi*. It felt like they were also trying to make this about gender, while also feeling very forced.

MA: I am very interested in how Disney frames their movies, from how they change the opening credits to set the tone, what the castle is going to look

like. And Sabrina, you had pointed out on Twitter that this one looks like the one from Shanghai Disneyland.

SM: Yes, the castle in the opening credits looks like Enchanted Storybook Castle at Shanghai Disneyland, which is interesting considering the park is a joint venture between the Walt Disney Company and the Chinese government, and this film is, too, in many ways.

MA: Yes, so Disney's live action films tend to have this voice over frame, it starts with *Maleficent* in 2014; the idea of 'this is the story you think you know, we're going to tell it again to see how well you know this story'. Up to that point, the framing devices were locked back in very early Disney animation, and one of the only ones that actually keeps a narrator present all the way through is *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), because we keep getting taken in and out of this storybook to move the narrative along. With *Mulan*, I would say it is not even *Mulan's* story, it is her father's story. The entire thing is framed as her father's recollection from the beginning. And the narratorial voices comes in about five times during the film, frames every one of her choices. We're not seeing this girl become a hero, we're hearing her father tell the story of how his daughter saves the dynasty. It's all about this patriarchal figure, and we can read this as a larger patriarchal culture, as autocratic society, as this thing the individual is always reacting to or part of. So, for me having that frame but also having this voice cut in and reiterate this over and over again, that this is his daughter, she is doing this to save the dynasty, was very heavy-handed to me.

JY: I had not even noticed that as much but I think you are completely right, I think it's part of that convention of telling the folklore to the audience. But what about the inclusion of the sister, at the expense of erasing the grandmother, who was like the best grandmother of all time in the original! The witch played by Gong Li is again problematic in Chinese culture because they don't really have witch symbology. So, you have her and the sister, and you'd expect the sister to narrate, because that would tie into the whole girl power motif. It's so fascinating you say that Michelle, because it didn't even occur to me that there is this puncture, but there is.

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MA: I only got it yesterday when watching it again, and it was jarring. And regarding the witch: there was so much potential in that character and it was so mishandled in so many ways. Even in the enemy figure, the Rouran, I have so many cultural questions about what's happening there, because they don't move away from the colourism in the animation. They said there's historical reason for it.

BC: What I noticed watching it was in certain camera angles, the scars on [villain Böri Khan] forehead look like horns. And with the witch there, you immediately wonder. Jingan is right, there isn't witch symbology in Chinese culture, there are a lot of foxes, and snakes, animal characters. You have the witch and in the end, you find out she had a change of heart, but why? It's because she misuses her *Qi*, but *how* does she misuse it? There is no reason given behind that. It's all very simplistic: this is good, this is evil. You have Böri Khan with the horn symbology, so aside from the different racial skin tones, we're also given this devil figure. We have to fight him, because they are the invaders of the country. And considering this and the voice over, I am just wondering how much of this is perhaps the requirement of the Chinese authorities that there has to be clear symbology of who is good and who is evil.

MA: I am now remembering that they're saying 'we're nomads'; there's a specific culture that is almost antithetical to the village life that is depicted, or even the life in the imperial army. I hope someone does extensive work actually reading this all culturally and analyses what is happening, because I can look at it and say there's something interesting here, but perhaps to do not have the competence to say what it is exactly about these people, this time frame. Disney with their live action films is really good about having specific historicizing details, so I'd be very interested in someone reading this closely, this dichotomy set up with these details.

SM: Let's come back to the intended audience: I read somewhere that they justified having a white director by saying that the film has to appeal to an American audience. This notion that a white person has to translate it for a US market is very telling.

MA: I think that's an accurate depiction of Disney's approach to everything. It brings to mind one of the justifications the Disney VP was using in different press articles for decisions made in *Aladdin*. This façade of throwing out words like 'intersectional' with no grounding in it. I would be very curious to compare the budget given to the live action *Mulan* vs. the budget given to Ava DuVernay for *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), which is a whole separate discussion, but I thought it was done very well but in a whole different way that didn't require translation. I have a lot of strong feelings about the corporate standpoint that you need whiteness to translate culture to an audience of people that isn't majority white. I know we use the term minority for anyone who isn't white, but let's be honest, it's the global majority. There's a very big discussion to be had about that kind of thinking and framing in cultural and media production.

SM: It's not even just the global majority, it's also a majority of the population in the United States. And whenever they think 'the US', they think 'white people'.

MA: And a very particular section of white people as well.

SM: Another thorny issue with the film was its distribution strategies: when it was supposed to come out, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and so it ended up being the first 'premier access' title released on Disney+ in September 2020, which means it cost you USD 30 to see this on top of your subscription fee for the first 3 months. It also opens up discussion about where you can even see the film if you don't have Disney+, especially in markets where it doesn't even exist.

JY: There were reviews on Weibo before it was even released in Chinese cinemas, and immediately there was backlash – about representation, about the *mise en scène*, it being a hodge-podge of imperial and the hegemonic nature of Chinese culture, etc.

BC: Cinemas were open in Malaysia in December 2020, so we got it in the cinemas. *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021) made a bigger splash, but those robots vs. monsters-type films are very popular with Malaysian audiences. Which is odd given the animated version was very popular with children. I grew up with Disney animated films, so did a lot of people in Southeast Asia, so not just Ma-

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laysia, but Singapore, Indonesia, the whole region. But not all cinemas were open even in Malaysia, even though it was not that badly hit by the pandemic at the time, so it was also made available very, very quickly on local streaming platforms which started out as satellite television. It's very much linked to China's media landscape as well, China and Hong Kong, because we get a lot of live content from them. It was available about a month after being in cinemas, and it cost MYR 10, which is equivalent to about GBP 2 on top of the monthly fee. But it being Asia, it was available illegally, so by the time it was released there was already so much talk, there was the 'milk tea alliance' - Malaysia not so much, but Thailand and Taiwan in particular had come up with this hashtag on Twitter about supporting the Hong Kong protestors at the time, because of Liu Yifei's pro-police brutality statement about Hong Kong on her social media, I think it was Weibo. It had created a lot of controversy, so people were boycotting the film [in support of Hong Kong]. This is part of the reason I chose not to watch it in the cinema. And thinking should I go to the cinema to watch something I knew I was going to hate, while endangering myself to go there during the pandemic.

MA: I know someone who called downloading the film illegally the only ethical interaction with that film, and I can't disagree with it. The credits for that film have so many nods to Chinese government. The intervention is very clear. It's very different from say, *Frozen II* (2019) [which] had to take a very different tact. They made an actual treaty with the Sami people regarding the depictions of their culture and they are the actual owner of those depictions, not Disney. There's a lot to discuss in that kind of construction as well. The backdrop of so much political controversy made those wide sweeping landscapes and all the things you are not seeing in them very, very interesting. It's a landscape that's been silenced. We know from the news, we know from global reports, we know from human rights reporting that in that landscape that's being shown as beautiful and mystical and exotic there are also terrible human rights abuses happening. The way that they are shot aerially you will probably never be able to tell how close you are to seeing something that maybe you should not be seeing. I would have a lot of questions about how much intervention there was about what landscapes could be pictured. What things had to be avoided as to not risk identification of certain locations. If they use a screen to speak so heavily about culture, about environment, about aesthetic,

the fact there's so much silencing and censorship implicit in those landscapes is something else I find interesting.

JY: We should say that it was filmed very close to the Xinjiang concentration camps where [Uyghur] genocide is currently taking place. There's a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Isaac Fisher, who could actually figure out the area in which they were in relation to those camps. It was harrowing to read that on Twitter. Interestingly enough, Niki Caro made no mystery of the fact they were filming in that area – long, long before the Hong Kong protests, long, long before we learned in the credits of how far this collaboration went. On her Instagram she posted images of the landscape and in doing so, she was taking ownership of that [landscape] as a filmmaker: I know this is going on, but from that hierarchical position of being a director, I'm taking ownership of that space.

BC: I don't think *Mulan* was actually the first Hollywood film that was being shot in China, in more modern times as these geopolitical issues unfolded. I can remember *Looper* (2016). I wonder in comparison, how much they had to compromise. I believe it [*Looper*] was shot in Shanghai. I assume lots of people want to shoot there, or in Beijing, urban areas. I am wondering because this is Disney, and I am sure the CCP government understands the global reach of Disney, how much more they would have to compromise compared to *Looper*, an indie film.

SM: Disney has that ongoing relationship with the government with the theme parks as well, they are already in bed with them and work with them in ways that aren't always ethical. There are all these existing agreements that may have helped with this film. I would imagine that this relationship gives them access another production or another studio perhaps wouldn't have.

BC: Interesting also that China then does not have access to Disney+. It has since started in Singapore and they have taken all the Marvel and *Star Wars* films off the other streaming platforms now, even in Malaysia, so it's been teased it would start here.¹ You currently can't get anything owned by Disney on other platforms like Netflix. Which makes me wonder if they also did that in China since there's no plans for Disney+ there as far as I know.

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Going back to Sabrina's question about audience, however, it feels like it was made for an Asian American audience so Disney can say, look, here's representation. This is a film without a white saviour, and a majority of people who watch it may not know about what happened behind the scenes, but they will care about what's on-screen. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) failed miserably in China, but was a huge hit in the UK and the States, and in Southeast Asia because it was something very familiar to us, when you take away all the crazy rich parts. It's speaking to experiences I grew up with, that people in Singapore grew up with, despite its problems. To me *Mulan* felt more like it was made for Asian Americans, Asian British, Asian Australians. But Disney being Disney would actually say this is actually for a global audience, but we can take and transplant that, and China would love it because there are Chinese people on there.

SM: So how do you all think the adaptation aspect plays into it all? They are definitely banking on nostalgia, banking on built-in audiences, especially millennial audiences, right now.

MA: There's an idea of 'correcting' involved. 'We're going to give you a new version that's not as problematic' – without ever understanding what the real problems were. It's almost like they got the CliffsNotes or abstract version of the criticisms of movies and never really engaged with the criticism. If the problem with the animated *Mulan* for some scholars and some viewers at the time was that it was playing to an American audience and it wasn't depicting real China, of course we have to double down with the authenticity thing. There's an amount of course correction they are trying to embed. I don't know that they can successfully with regard to cultural competency adapt their own property if they are so intent on meeting the nostalgic remembrances of their 'core' audience. Which is, as it has been since Walt Disney was alive, an audience of white Christian conservative Anglo-Americans.

BC: Disney's entire archive is built on this nostalgia. I think it's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, you can bank on people remembering the animated film and sell it as a remastering, a live action version of that. You can secure that the franchise doesn't get away from Disney at the end of the day. On the other hand, you will know people will notice that this did not happen in the

animated version, and they won't like it. You can now be more sensitive about things like diversity, gender representation, racial representation. But I'm not sure if it's doing them many favours if they're doing it superficially because they will get pushback from both sides.

JY: These films aren't made in a vacuum. They have this bank of work that continues to evolve with different audiences and different writers. This nostalgia thing is going to come and kick them in the [...] you know what. How can this be viable?

MA: I would just hope they would start to do better. And trust that they can build new things. I have not seen *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) yet. But *Frozen* (2013) was new, and it did very, very well, and so did the sequel. To an extent, so was *Maleficent*. I hope that they reach the conclusion that they don't need to keep retelling the same story. That they realize they can find people elsewhere who tell good stories and go, 'we believe in their work, here is our budget'. That for me is a lesson to take [from *Mulan*]. What irritates me the most is that there was so much damn potential. Why not build a completely fictional Asian-inspired version of another world and keep that character of the witch for a full-bodied story? It's things like that I wish they would do better. Let go of authenticity as a metric, because it's never going to work. If you have one big stick label of who you're authentic to, you're still going to exclude a whole lot of other people, and a lot of other ways of being and knowing. Just do new things!

BC: It's a thing for them to consider as filmmakers as well, for them to invest in new talent. [...] At the end of the day, Disney – and this also goes out to all the multimedia conglomerates out there! – have to realize that the audience is global, but you cannot make content that targets a global audience. Someone's always going to be silenced, someone's always going to be excluded and someone is going to be offended by something. And when you talk about authenticity, whose authenticity are we talking about? It means something different to everyone. They need to stop thinking of audiences as an abstract global poll.

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JY: Speaking from a screenwriting perspective, I'm constantly being told by predominantly Caucasian script editors and producers 'where's the authenticity of this story?' and yet, logically, and literally, isn't this my story? I'm telling it from my perspective! The term 'authenticity' has become a code word for homogeneity in a way, because it's actually being directed by one group. There is no end to the sanitization of cultural stories which is a great shame because that is what makes art so beautifully diverse.

SM: In the end it feels like if you're trying to make a story for everyone, you're making a story for no one. It *isn't* a small world, after all.

Thank all of you for this wonderful discussion. ●

Endnote

1. Disney+ is now available in Malaysia, branded as Disney+ Hotstar.