

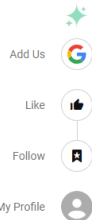


Disney's 'Mulan' Encapsulates the Spirit of the Original Folktale



By Rachel Sandell Published Jun 19, 2023, 10:15 AM EDT

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When it comes to legends and **fairy tales**, Disney has a reputation of making dark stories more child-friendly to suit a wider audience. Fairy tales like *Cinderella*, children's books like *Peter Pan*, and legends like *Mulan* are all handled with kid gloves when Disney gets around to adapting them. But that doesn't mean the spirit of these stories aren't true to the originals.

This is especially evident in Disney's 1998 version of *Mulan*, who, while much different than the version she was based on, nevertheless didn't fail to live up to the standards of bravery, cunning, and honor shown by her predecessor.

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Mulan has been a popular figure for centuries, and though she is widely regarded as fictional, there are those who argue that her story was very much real. While the most recent modern depiction of **Mulan came to the big screen in 2020**, the story of Hua Mulan dates as far back as the sixth century. "**The Ballad of Mulan**" is a fairly short poem that tells Mulan's story over the course of about 10 years. In the poem, Mulan recognizes her own sense of duty when the summons to war from the "Khan" would come for either her elderly father or her little brother.

Choosing to make a sacrifice for her father, Mulan dresses as a man and serves in the army for a decade, not once letting slip that she's a woman. Whereas numerous other generals meet their deaths in a hundred battles, Mulan is one of those "stout soldiers" who returns home. Upon meeting the Emperor, referred to in the poem as the "Son of Heaven," Mulan respectfully refuses a promotion, asking instead for a horse to ride home.



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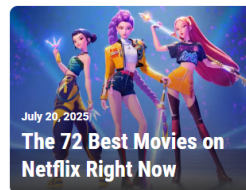
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Only after Mulan retires from battle does she reveal that she's a woman to her comrades, who after 12 years never even suspected her true gender. Mulan answers their confusion with a metaphor:

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"The he-hares's feet go hop and skip, / The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled. / Two hares running side by side close to the ground, / How can they tell if I am he or she?"

Mulan's Tale Changes Over Time But Never Fails to Inspire



Over the course of years, it only makes sense for such an old story to gain new additions. **Some versions of Mulan** tell her tale differently, even before 1998 when Disney put its spin on it.

Playwrights and novelists have even changed Mulan's origins and background to suit their own visions. For example, in 1655, the author **Chu Renhuo** wrote *Romance of Sui and Tang*, which gave a bit of an epilogue to Mulan's years in the army. In his version, Mulan was taken captive and ended up taking her own life. Needless to say, this was a much darker spin to the tale.

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Though "The Ballad of Mulan" started off as a straightforward story in the form of a short poem, many storytellers have taken inspiration from the duty-bound soldier — enough to write their versions. Though the adaptations of Mulan vary and change over time, the most prominent details of her story remain the same.

Disney's 'Mulan' Retains the Folktale's Spirit



Disney changed a lot, even in comparison to previous adaptations that made significant tweaks to Mulan's backstory, ethnic background, and even her ultimate fate. For instance, the villains of the film, the Huns, historically weren't around at the time that the story of Mulan would have taken place. More historically accurate villains for the film would have been the tribal raiders called the **Xiongnu**.

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Other surface-level changes are, of course, the more children-focused moments of the story, such as Mushu (**Eddie Murphy**), who was a Disney-original character. While duty to parental figures and ancestors are certainly large parts of “The Ballad of Mulan,” her ancestors also don’t appear in the original poem. Even Mulan’s (**Ming-Na Wen**) love interest, Li Shang (**BD Wong**), never made an appearance in the original and was most likely added because Disney films at the time usually had a love interest baked into its film formula. Other characters from the poem, for example Mulan’s older sister and younger brother, don’t appear in Disney’s version at all.

However, the biggest changes come from **Mulan herself**. While Mulan’s decision to dress as a man and go to war in the poem is made out of duty and loyalty, the film added a new layer to her choice by going into her personal life before the summons. Before her adventure even begins, she feels out of place as a woman in her family and fears that because she is not the ideal daughter or bride she will dishonor her family.

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Mulan’s subversion of gender roles combine with her love for and loyalty to her family in Disney’s version, whereas the poem doesn’t explore much of her personality beyond her time in the army. Even with all the added child-friendly moments and the differences in how and why Mulan made her choice, however, Disney’s Mulan follows the tradition of maintaining the original storyline and heart of the tale.

Despite its differences, both versions of Mulan enlist in the army out of love for her family, at least in part. She demonstrates valor in battle, uses her strength and cunning to save the Emperor, and denies a promotion so that she can return home. The story is still about a brave and dutiful daughter who faces danger and death and emerges on the other side of the battlefield as a wise and strong homeward-bound soldier.

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The spirit of “The Ballad of Mulan” still lives in **modern depictions of Mulan**, no matter how the details differ: her fighting spirit, born in love and honor, is at the center of the story in all variations. What’s more, Mulan’s incredible feats remain inspirational for any underdog looking for an example in courage, and she’s an especially great example for young girls (and women) around the world.

While Disney’s version of Hua Mulan may be watered down for kids and not 100% accurate in terms of detail, she still remains true to the spirit of the original Hua Mulan. Some stories, however old, are too strong to just fade away. The myth of Mulan will doubtless continue to inspire for years to come.

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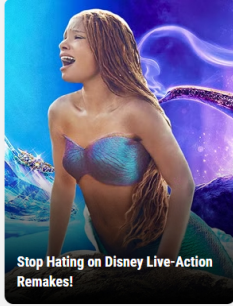
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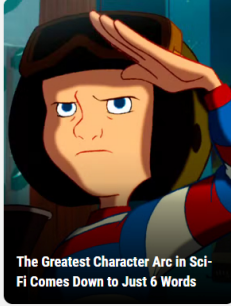
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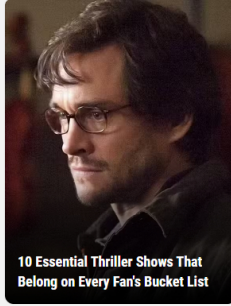
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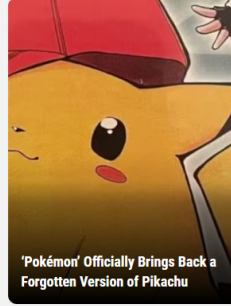
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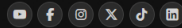
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