

Disney's Live-Action Mulan and the Controversies Surrounding It

by Ece Hasgöl

Disney added another remake of a memorable cartoon to their list, and the live-action remake was released in Disney+ on September 4th. Official trailers for the movie were published in December 2019, and the movie was initially planned to meet the audience on March 24th, however, it had to be postponed several times throughout the year because of “who shall not be named”. Finally announced with a date, the movie received serious complaints from the fans; you had to pay an extra 30\$ to play the movie in addition to the monthly price of Disney+. This was not even the first nor the biggest issue with the film.

No one expects too much from a Disney live-action. It is there to “fix the problematic aspects” in the cartoon version, it is there to make money from the adults who were children or teenagers when the cartoon was released. In the princess movies generally, they also tend to “empower women” and give them new voices. In the case of the Mulan remake, it came with the promise of being more respectful and accurate to the Chinese culture and the myth it originated from. That meant no Mushu the dragon accompanying Mulan on her journey and also no songs unlike classical Disney movies to showcase a more realistic take on the ballad of Mulan.

Then fans noticed the character Li Shang was not on the cast list, which also meant that fan-favorite song “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” would not make it to the live-action, and raised questions. The film producer mentioned, “Particularly in the time of the #MeToo movement, having a commanding officer that is also the sexual love interest was very uncomfortable and we didn’t think it was appropriate.”¹ Nevertheless fans were not happy about it, Li Shang was an important part of the LGBTQ+ representation in Disney as many viewed him as bisexual since he also had an interest in Mulan alter-male disguise in the army, Ping. Even though the reason seemed valid for some, others have argued that Li Shang did not use abusive power on Mulan, or Ping at the time, for a relationship and therefore was unnecessarily excluded from the remake.

Not only Disney nor the movie had its problems, but the cast also did. The lead actress, Liu Yifei who gave life to Mulan shared her comment supporting police brutality in Hong Kong protest from Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. “I also support the Hong Kong police. You can beat me up now.”² As if all of these were not enough negative discourse before the movie aired at all, the worst came after people realized that Disney shot some of the scenes in Xinjiang province in China, where millions of Muslim Uighurs are forced into concentration camps. In the end-credits of the movie, Disney thanked several Chinese entities, eight of them being in Xinjiang. The list even includes the Turpan Bureau of Public Security and Publicity Department of CPC Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Committee, which are constitutions that produce propaganda for the Communist Party and deny concentration camps and calling it “reeducation camps”.



Disney does not even deny the problem, Disney CFO Christine McCarthy answered a question upon the scandals “It’s common knowledge that, in order to film in China, you have to be granted permission. That permission comes from the central government. ... So, in our credits, it recognized both China and locations in New Zealand. I would just leave it at that, but it has generated a lot of issues for us.” Chinese audience as well as the Westerns did not take the movie well. Everyone seems to agree that all the budget spent and controversies were not worth for an emotionless, trying-to-be-realistic-but-not-that-much, no-song version of a 1998 Mulan.

¹ <https://collider.com/mulan-li-shang-not-in-live-action-remake-reason-why/>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49373276>

Screencap via https://twitter.com/jeannette_ng

<https://www.bignewsnetwork.com/news/266345863/uyghur-detention-facilities-found-in-xinjiang-turpan>