Opinion
Culture
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by Rose Pacatte

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Long ago in China, during the time of emperors, Hua Mulan (Yifei Liu) is a young woman of marriageable age. Although her rural village is small, a matchmaker (Pei-Pei Cheng) is employed to find her a suitable husband. The problem is Mulan excels in martial arts and doesn't want to be married.

This stresses her mother, Hua Li (Rosalind Chao), but her sister, Hua Xiu (Xana Tang), admires her. The other females in the village, however, look down on Mulan when the matchmaking efforts fall apart.

Along the Silk Road trade route, the warrior Böri Khan (Jason Scott Lee) leads his Rouran hoards toward the Imperial City to take over China, leaving devastation in his path. In response, the emperor (Jet Li) commands that one male from every family must join the imperial army to stop Khan. But Mulan's father, Hua Zhou (Tzi Ma), a hero who was injured in previous wars, only has two daughters, so he must join the army.

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Mulan cannot accept her father's sacrifice. She steals his sword, a gift from the emperor with the words "loyal, brave and true," engraved on the blade to describe Zhou's character. She dresses like a young man and makes the treacherous journey to the training camp where she joins other young men who have been conscripted to fight Khan.

Khan has a secret weapon, however, a witch, Xianniang (Li Gong), who is a shapeshifter, and is employed to cause havoc so Khan wins his battles. Xianniang was cast out from her village as a child because of her abilities and Khan took her in and gave her a home, recognizing her powers as no one else ever had.

Mulan successfully hides her gender but because she will not shower, the men in her unit complain about how badly she smells. Chen Honghui (Yoson An), a young man in her unit, admires Mulan, but she does not want to be friends with anyone. She does promise her unit, however, that they will be safe in the battle to come.

"Mulan" is the best live-action film to come from Disney in a very long time. Directed by Niki Caro, who gave us the luminous "Whale Rider" in 2002 about another young girl called to leadership, revisits familiar thematic territory with a much larger budget.

I first watched "Mulan" on my 18-inch computer screen but it deserves a very large screen because there is so much to take in. The beauty of the cinematography by Mandy Walker is incomparable and the soundtrack includes melodies from Disney's 1998 animated version of "Mulan," rather than the songs themselves.

Usually, too many writers spoil the soup, so to say, and with four writers, Disney took a big chance at losing or skewing the plot, as they did with its 2012 film "Brave." Rick Jaffa, Amanda Silver, Lauren Hynek and Elizabeth Martin wrote the screenplay that some critics feel favored action over character development. I was engaged in the story from beginning to end, looking to see if the narrative would fall into the Disney romance trap or present an authentic heroic character. I think the current Mulan, as played by Lui, is a young woman her father, family and village could be proud of.

The Bechdel test for women in movies asks three simple questions about the presence of female characters in movies:

1. Are there two or more women in the film and do they have names?
2. Do they talk to each other?
3. Do they talk to each other about something other than a man?

At first glance, it might seem like the film fails this test, but looking carefully, you can see that "Mulan" has a strong and authentic human, feminist theme guiding it. The answer is yes to the first question; yes to question two, though the conversation starts out about men and marriage (and possible romance) but moves soon enough to family, community and the greater good.

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As for question three, the women all talk about a man because the culture dictated that marriage was how men and women lived their lives. Though never enthusiastic about possible marriage, once her father was conscripted to the army, Mulan believes her call to take his place transcends whatever good the security of a successful match might give her.

Carrying through the feminist theme, the juxtaposition between Mulan and Xianniang proves to be one of the high points of the film. They begin as adversaries, with Xianniang, who morphs into a hawk when needed, threatening Mulan because "women are not allowed to be powerful." But Mulan calls out Xianniang to be her best self, letting go of the trauma and bitterness of her childhood and servitude to Khan. If you look carefully at this masked character and the beautiful tiara she wears, it is made out of chains.

Actually, both women are hiding their identity, Mulan with her clothing and hair knotted in a bun, and Xianniang with her mask. Their motivations, however, are very different. Neither character becomes free or fully a woman until they have the courage to reveal their true identity.

Birds are used as important symbols throughout the story. The film opens with a young Mulan chasing down a renegade chicken and Xianniang turning into a predatory hawk, a negative view of woman's power, and ends with the phoenix, a positive feminist symbol of beauty and sacrificial strength.

In an era when "truth" is a precious commodity, and lying or deception in the public square is becoming more normalized because there are almost no consequences, Mulan's deception offers viewers something important to talk about. Sure, it's just a story, but cinematic stories tell us who we are and who we ought to be, says Georgetown University professor and author Theresa Sanders.

This film offers us a chance to ask what I might have done in a similar circumstance, such as being Jewish in Germany during World War II, or being a Christian who is asked to hide people the government is hunting down. Films are a moral laboratory, after all, and a perfect space to talk about things that matter.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the founding director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles. "Mulan" is available for purchase on Disney+.]