
Eastern Witch from the West: Xianniangin Niki Caro's *Mulan*

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Abstract: *In Niki Caro's live-action *Mulan* (2020), the "witch," named Hawk by film critics or Xianniang (Immortal Woman) in closed captioning, is a twenty-first century "walk-on" (fly-in?), entirely absent in the genesis of the *Mulan* legend, the fifth-century "The Ballad of *Mulan*." Nor does she exist in any previous reincarnations in the Chinese and English language, including Maxine Hong Kingston's ethnic classic *The Woman Warrior* and Disney animation *Mulan*. Given the absence of the witch before 2020, is Caro's addition to the cast a Western wolf in Eastern sheep's clothing, speaking in English to boot, swallowing whole the gullible global audience? Is Caro affixing, fixating on, a feminist, homoerotic tail to an imperial, heteronormal Chinese tale? Is Caro a Western neo-imperialist bewitching—pun intended—the East in the name of a liberal, all-Asian performance?*

Hawk performs black magic on the battlefield, courtesy of Caro's special effects and computer-generated imagery. Occidental media technology conjures up the ghost of a phantasmagoric Orient, except this Orient is possessed by the Anglo-European mania over sorcery. How to read Hawk's power—including that of possessing and zombieifying her victims—empowered by Orientalism, or the Chinese witch's agency vested by the Australian Caro?

Keywords: *Mulan, China, Orientalism, Orient*

In Niki Caro's live-action *Mulan* (2020), the witch character is named by film critics as Hawk for her metamorphosis into the raptor. The IMDb film website and closed captioning simply identify her as Xianniang, which means "Immortal Woman." Remaining unnamed other than the "witch" diegetically, that is, so addressed by characters within the film, she is alluded to, extradiegetically, by reviewers and subtitlers in two diametrically opposed ways for the Anglophone global cinema. To call her by the shorthand Hawk underlines the dark animal kinship; to call her Xianniang risks alienating the non-Sinophone audience, who most likely would not have turned on closed captioning and who would have missed the deification implicit in xian (immortal) even if they had. Either name removes the character from the centrality of humanity, leaning to bestiality or to beatification. The former name resonates with the tangibility of cinematic special effects of a soaring hawk and the flock of bat-like birds; the latter is largely occluded because of the unintelligibility of romanized Xianniang.

Ironically, the visible materiality of the hawk and batty birds constitutes digital mirages, technological sleight of hand; the impenetrable Xianniang encrypts two concrete Chinese ideograms 仙娘, an abstract mess sourced from a solid mass of fifteen brushstrokes, five to form 仙, ten to form 娘. However, in a world where traditional calligraphy and penmanship have been flattened into romanization via keyboards, the five brushstrokes of 仙 are cut down to the four keystrokes of xian in pinyin, and the ten brushstrokes of 娘 to the five keystrokes of niang. Translation converts meaning or soul as much as it casts off form or body. What if the meaning rests solely in the form? What if the spirit of the character—both the fictional person and the words pointing to that person—resides in the letter of the character? Contrary to Walter

Benjamin's utopian prophecy, "The Task of the Translator"—not only subtitlers but cultural translators of film reviewers and filmmakers like Niki Caro—may unwittingly amputate the source culture in exchange for the mighty prosthesis and filmic gadgetry to win over the target culture.

To proceed with the name of "least resistance" yet most fraught in English, the witch Hawki is a twenty-first century "walk-on" (fly-in?), entirely absent in the genesis of the Mulan legend, the fifth century "The Ballad of Mulan." Nor does she exist in any previous incarnations in the Chinese and English language, including Maxine Hong Kingston's ethnic classic *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Disney animation *Mulan* (1998). The closest one can find is the animation's monstrous, gorilla-like Hun leader Shan Yu with his barrel chest, long arms, sharp fangs, and slant eyes. Given their shared predator attributes, Caro casts the witch as a familiar, "a slave" to her Shan Yu character, Böri Khan, complete with an umlaut over "o." The diacritical mark ousts the character from the English language and culture, while effecting no change in its pronunciation. Purely decorative, the "ö" is for looks only, aiming to rub off on the character played by Jason Scott Lee, made up to look Central Asian, almost Arabic, as do his dark-clad, masked, and turbaned cohort of shadow warriors. That the Khan's horde debut by multiplying from one Khan on horseback to many like a mirage out of the desert validate their Central Asian or Near Eastern association. Drawing not only from the long Chinese dynastic memory against northern nomadic "barbarians," Caro also taps into post-9/11 worldwide paranoia in pop culture where villainy carries an odious Orientalist, Muslim tone.

The witch's same-sex look-alike is the shaman or "Great Wizard" (figure 1) in *Matchless Mulan*, one of a handful of Chinese media conglomerate iQIYI's rush productions during the lull of *Mulan*'s delayed global release, bumped off by Covid-19 from Wuhan.

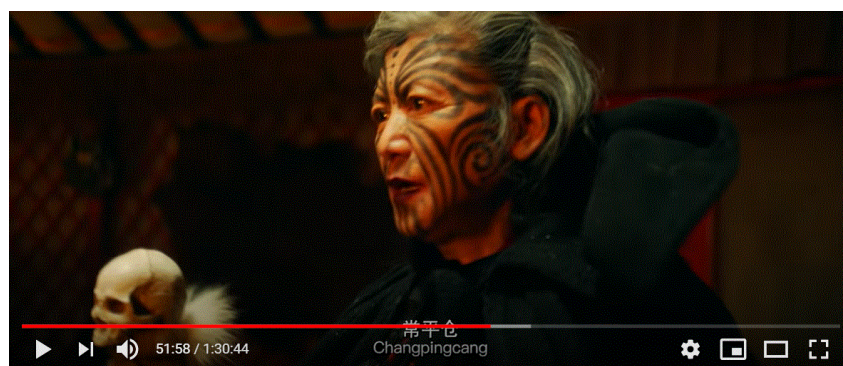


Figure 1: The shaman or "Great Wizard" in *Matchless Mulan*.

Two letters apart, albeit with identical vowels, Wuhan and Mulan resemble Sino-ese twins, one born at the close of 2019, the other all but aborted the following year. Mulan is female, yet that initial "m" signals the historical male impersonator. By contrast, Wuhan's "w" points to female, yet the city's homegrown, airborne bug ravages the world like a historic, masculine conqueror.

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Mulan Who?

Before turning to the supporting actress Hawk, the spotlight ought to stay a while longer on the leading actress Mulan. High time for a paternity test for Mulan: what is her last name? Is it the Chinese tradition's Hua, although her literary debut in "The Ballad of Mulan" does not exactly spell that out? Is it the Cantonese inflected Fa, as in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*? Kingston's ethnic classic introduced this cross-dressing heroine who, as Chinese legend has it, substituted her ailing father for battle against invasions along China's northern borders. Is her surname Disney when the 1998 animation absorbs Kingston's ethnic angle into its multicultural lineups of teenage girl power? Grounded in the whiteness of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and of Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Disney adroitly expands to and whitewashes Arab Jasmine in *Aladdin* (1992), Native American Pocahontas in the eponymous 1995 animation, gypsy Esmeralda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and Chinese or Asian in *Mulan*.

For decades, the Chinese performing arts and film industry have produced their own heroines. As opposed to Mulan Hollywood, China proudly presents Mulan Huallywood à la the second syllable of *zhonghua* for China, eerily punning its very own hua (flower, prosperity) with her surname. *Hua Mulan* (2009) featuring China's lead performers Wei Zhao and Kun Chen arrives almost as a delayed response to the popular Disney animation. Under the auspices of Magic Kingdom, Niki Caro turns Mulan Disney into a feature film with an Asian and Asian American cast in 2020. The global release of *Mulan* Caro, so to speak, having been postponed due to Covid-19, the time lag is immediately exploited by iQIYI, which cobbles together *Matchless Mulan* and *Mulan Legend*, both streamed online in the summer months of 2020. An animation *Kung Fu Mulan* by Leo Liao follows at Caro's heels in being released in October 2020. A paternity test may prove ultimately futile in the face of so many serial sperm donors: Hollywood, Huallywood, Disney, Caro, iQIYI, and Liao.

At the heart of the Mulan legend in "The Ballad of Mulan" lies twin binarities of gender and race. A female pretends to be her father in a border conflict between China's majority Han people and another unnamed race to the north. That the breach comes from an unidentified source arises from centuries-old Chinese anxiety over the amorphous umbrella term of northern nomadic "barbarians," who have made relentless incursions into China, culminating in two dynasties—Mongolians' Yuan and Manchurians' Qing—both eventually establishing their capitals in Beijing. "The Ballad of Mulan" betrays, however, the porousness of that dichotomy between Chinese and non-Chinese. Answering the imperial conscription, Mulan in "The Ballad" describes it as having been handed down from "the Khan," which segues subsequently to the Son of Heaven, the traditional Chinese address of respect for the emperor. In her triumphant homecoming, Mulan is granted an audience with "the Son of Heaven," which changes in no time to "The Khan asks what she wants." To call China's emperor the Khan after chieftains of northern nomads is not only bewildering but verging on blasphemy, as if one nomadic Khan bent on offense meets Beijing's Khan in defense. Arguably, the ballad's switch stems from a fluid tribal perception of the nation's leader, one that flips between northern Khans and Chinese emperors. Mulan is likely to be a member of the northern minorities retaining residuals of tribal linguistic habits, despite having been assimilated and sinologized. Proper nouns for concrete things, ranging from daily objects to human relationships of naming such as the Khan, are the last to go anyway in any assimilation.

The Disney animation glosses over the *Ballad's* racialblurring by pitting the northern Huns commanded by the ape-like ShanYu against the Han army stationed along the Great Wall. At the outset, the imperial decree mobilizes male conscripts in response to the Hun incursion. Disney identifies the villain's race as "Hun," whereas the *Ballad* does not. The clarity of Disney is cartoonish, given the *Ballad's* historical ambiguity. Not only narrowing down the umbrella term Huns to Rourans, but Caro's film also takes leave of the *Ballad* in the setting of Mulan's village. Her family lives in the renowned tourist site of Hakanes adobe roundhouses in Fujian and southern China, over a thousand miles away from the northern borderland of the *Ballad*. The Haka, suffice to say, is one of the most ancient Han ethnic groups, entirely different from tribal nomads, sinologized or not, along the Great Wall.

To a vigilant Chinese reader, the racial obfuscation would cry out from the text. Yet another obscuring concludes the *Ballad*. The male impersonator through twelve years of military service returns to her parents after the war, changes back to her female costume and makeup, and shocks her comrades. The last lines read: "The male rabbit's feet are kicking, the female rabbit's eyes squint, almost closed / Both rabbits running side by side, how can you tell whether I am male or female?" "Kicking" and "squint[ing], almost closed" comprise a Chinese maxim, *pushuomili* ("kicking, hopping" and "misty, unclear"), over the confusing and mysterious state of things. In China's patriarchal, heteronormal tradition, that unsettling haze is never meant to include sexual orientation. A dozen years of gender-bending aberration in the military constitute an extreme condition with the express purpose of extoling filial piety in a family and patriotism in a nation. The female serves at the pleasure of the father (figure).

The racial, national division of Han and Hun has already been deconstructed by the *Ballad's* internal evidence. Conceivably, even the gender division is subject to debate should we take the *Ballad's* last word at its word. The rhetorical question at the end, "How can you tell whether I am male or female?", is literal because Mulan defies gender binarism. Rather than either-or, she is both-and as well as neither-nor. Instead of two rabbits—a female Mulan and her male colleague—running alongside each other, kicking barbarian butts, pardon the expression, the cross-dresser inhabits both rabbits, both roles, in Freudian terms. The buck's kicking of hind legs symbolizes phallic erection; the doe's squinting eyes acquire a vaginal likeness or orgiastic expression. Or the other way around at the moment of orgasm: female leg muscles spasm; male eyes swoon. Ideally, *la petite mort* culminates lovemaking of two bodies and consciousnesses into one climax, bridging Eros and Thanatos, equating Self and Other. The various Freudian scenarios circle back to Kingston, who capitalizes on androgyny when General Fa Mu Lan alters her armor to mask her pregnancy. The most masculine moment of killing happens to be the most feminine moment of gestation.

Hawk Caro

Hawk the witch materializes out of left field of the Mulan legend or, geopolitically, to the left of China all the way to the West—Europe and America and Australia, from which Niki Caro hails. Hawk performs black magic on the battlefield, courtesy of special effects and computer-generated imagery. Occidental, Hollywood media technology conjures up the ghost of a phantasmagoric Orient, except this Orient is possessed by the Anglo-European mania over sorcery. How to read Hawk's power, which includes possessing, merging, and zombie-fying her victims of a Central Asian caravan merchant, an imperial soldier, and, lastly, the imperial chancellor? Taking

control of these victims' body and mind resonates with Western—not Eastern—vampire lore, which ties in with the repeated mise en scène of swarms of bat-like birds in flight cross-dissolving into the witch on foot. Vampiric possession and bats fall within Western popular culture. Hawk is empowered by Orientalism, harking back to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) from across "the most Western of splendid bridges over the Danube. . . [taking] us among the traditions of Turkish rule" (1). Turkish or Transylvanian, *Dracula* transports itself in a coffin to England, bringing Eastern despotism and death to individual sentience. Likewise, the Chinese witch's agency flows from the Australian Caro and the Western mythology over witchcraft.

Long before Hawk graces the screen, the stigma of the witch is already introduced by Mulan's mother, but in reference to Mulan. The mother fears that neighbors would "call her a witch" had Mulan failed to conceal her inborn *chi*, a supernatural power manifested in her gliding through air or letting her weapons fly. In fact, villagers do curse Mulan as a "witch" after she gives chase to a chicken, her gravity-defying prowess surpassing any mortal male. The two women warriors of Hawk and Mulan are inextricably intertwined through the indeterminacy of the witch and the warrior in the eye of patriarchy, one that colors women's perception right from the outset. This *chi* is essential for military exploits, hence celebrated in male heirs. Misplaced in a female body like Mulan's that leaps across rooftops, this mysterious force of the chosen damns her instead. Women's sole avenue to "bring honor to the family" is through arranged marriage, one of many places where Caro follows verbatim the animation's stilted lyrics and dated plot. Such Orientalist stereotypes span the two decades of Disney's animation and Caro's feature film. Amidst the millennial maelstrom over racial and gender injustice, Caro has not disabused herself of Orientalist vocabulary and milieu. Rather, she recycles the plotline and the high points of the animation to cater to millennial audience who had grown up on Disney animations. The live-action feature film constitutes a collage of Orientalist banalities.

One such cliché concerns Chinese families; Caro's retelling of *Mulan* hinges on a Confucian-style family. Beyond reiterating stereotypical virtues of loyal, brave, and true carved on Mulan's sword, the Hua family heirloom, a fourth inscription is added to the back of the emperor's sword bequeathed to Mulan in the closing moments after she has saved the empire. The fourth word is *xiao*, filial piety, rendered as "devotion to the family." This commends Mulan's dedication to "honor," to borrow the Orientalist buzzword again, her biological family as well as the collective family headed by the emperor.

Family becomes the point at which Hawk's and Mulan's destinies diverge. In their confrontations, Hawk sees through Mulan's disguise. "We are the same," urges Hawk at joining forces, "we will take our place together" (figure 2).



Figure 2: Hawk urges Mulan to join forces in Niki Caro's *Mulan*.

While their chi or innate abilities housed in female bodies are similar, Hawk is practically an orphan, shunned by all except the Khan, a cruel adoptive father who exploits her talents. The Khan, in turn, rages against the Chinese emperor (played by Jet Li) as if he were a rebellious, even parricidal, son about to set aflame the bound yet composed father figure. The Khan seethes in fury in the name of avenging his father of the same name, slain by the emperor earlier. Whereas Mulan replaces her father in battle to keep him alive, the Khan wishes to kill and replace the emperor as the master of the land. That he does so under the guise of revenge veils his desire to be the father; that Böri Khan is what both the father and the son are called suggests the identical impulse of the alpha male, always singular after displacing the biological or symbolic patriarch. Despite his grotesque scars and weathered countenance, the Khan looks almost churlish, so childish as he strikes two scimitars to generate fiery sparks that alight on and burn the emperor's unruffled face, a silly child's game, a "warm-up" for the imminent burning at the stake. The Khan's lame bluster promises no paternal patronage to Hawk or any of his followers. By contrast, Mulan's loving biological family comes under the wings of the Father of China, the emperor, the Son of Heaven. By corollary, Mulan becomes the beloved granddaughter to Heaven.

Absent a family, Hawk's power seems corrupted into *maleficium* in opposition to Mulan's chi. In their skirmishes, Caro performs a shotgun marriage of Western demonology and Eastern mysticism. However, both witchery and chi remain so ambiguous and ill-defined that they are presented as not only alike but causal. Mulan's repressed chi comes to fruition on account of Hawk's "mercy killing" of the male impersonator in her to free her chi. Feeling spurned by Mulan's refusal to be true to her feminine core, Hawk flings a dart at Mulan's heart, disposing of this "toy" soldier who could have been so much more. Yet that dart is stuck in Mulan's tight, breast-flattening wrapping: Mulan is saved by her disguise (figure 3).



Figure 3: Hawk's dart is stuck in Mulan's tight, breast-flattening wrapping.

Having fainted from this near death and gradually coming around, Mulan 2.0 sheds all pretense of masculinity, including armor and helmet, her long black hair flowing in the wind, riding to the rescue of her comrades. Letting go of the masquerade clearly empowers her, but the logic escapes the viewer. If the corset-style wrapping has shielded her, then she ought to take on more—not less—protective gear, including gender. Caro romanticizes to win over the viewer's heart, not the head. The rush of a feeling of triumph, along with the crescendo of music and tracking shots, is designed to overwhelm the audience.

Hawk's demise reprises this scene of mercy killing to birth Mulan, but in reverse. Hawk dares to challenge her master the Khan, inspired by the heroine Mulan, a model for what Hawk could have been, if only she had fared in a more tolerant world, a.k.a., imperial China. Sensing a greater threat, the Khan turns his arrow aimed at Hawk toward Mulan. To save Mulan a second time, Hawk dives down to take the arrow (figure 4), making possible the subsequent duel between Mulan and the Khan.



Figure 4: Hawk dives down to take the arrow in order to save Mulan.

Nevertheless, Caro's triumphant plotline proceeds from one narrative cage to another, from racial stereotypes of nomadic and marauding Huns to those of patriarchal and compassionate Hans. Despite their seeming antagonism, both Mulan and Hawk gravitate to the same Confucian patriarchal center. Hawk's realization that "They accept you, but they will never accept me" pivots on "they," the world of men which adjudicates between heroism and hedonism, between the flight of the phoenix and the fall of the hawk.

Their closeness is foreshadowed by their avian avatars: hawk and phoenix. The difference rests in the fact that Mulan is blessed by the phoenix soaring well above her, an ancestral spirit watching over her. Indeed, in her showdown with the Khan on bamboo scaffoldings—yet another trite kung fu tableau from King Hu's bamboo grove in *A Touch of Zen* (1971)—where the emperor is manacled, the phoenix rises up in the distance behind Mulan, its wings extending from Mulan's shoulders as though endowing her with aerial chi (figure 5).



Figure 5: The phoenix rises up with wings extending from Mulan's shoulders.

The phoenix is conjured up out of nowhere as much by Mulan's desperation after losing her sword as by the emperor's exhortation: "You are a mighty warrior. Rise up like a phoenix!" Mulan is enabled by Chinese mythology over the phoenix, the counterpart to the dragon embodied in the emperor, as well as by Western mythology over the birth of phoenix out of the cauldron that has incinerated her sword into ashes. The phoenix' wings over Mulan's shoulders is the brief moment where the corporeal splicing occurs. In Hawk's case, either the raptor or the bat-like throng metamorphoses into Hawk on foot. Whereas Mulan's humanity remains intact with a fleeting image of two-in-one high up on the bamboo scaffoldings, Hawk's identity collapses with those of animals. The divergence notwithstanding, their chi keeps them aloft. The male principle, on the other hand, seems bound to the earth. The emperor is in bondage; the only martial stunt he pulls is to catch the arrow shot by the Khan. Even the arrow returned to pierce the Khan's heart is aerially kicked and redirected by Mulan, after being flung high by the emperor. The Khan, of course, breathes his last prone on the ground.

The witch and the warrior differ only in terms of social acceptance, which debunks the neoliberal notion of individual meritocracy. Hawk, rejected by all, turns to serve the Khan like a slave. By contrast, Mulan finds herself through male impersonating first, and subsequently through male-rescuing, but only after the rebirth of her femininity at the hands of Hawk. Since the male she saves happens to be the Chinese emperor, Mulan is not only spared for transgressions against military code of conduct and gender roles, but she is well-nigh apotheosized. The witch dies; the warrior flies high. Mulan in history fades; Mulan in Disney learns English and does a bit of queerbaiting with her fellow witch in what Caro intimates as "a love scene."

Niki Caro's addition of Gong Li as the witch culminates gender instability throughout centuries of retelling in the East and the West. In Robert Ito's *The New York Times* review on September 3, 2020, Caro notes: "And there's a scene between Mulan and Gong Li's character that's literally directed like a love scene. It's all conscious, and yet the movie can also live for a general audience quite happily." Caro consciously fashions homoerotic tease that has remained repressed in textual subconsciousness owing either to the absence of other females, as in "The Ballad of Mulan," or to

the dominance of heterosexual romance, as in *Mulan* and *Shang* of the Disney animation and Wei Zhao and Kun Chen of *Hua Mulan*. Nevertheless, Caro hastens to promise that the LGBTQ motif lends itself to a heteronormal cooptation by Disney's general audience. Caro's proviso suggests a balancing act between commercial interests and artistic visions. Caro visualizes what is hiding in plain sight for almost two millennia: *Mulan* cross dresses not to replace her father but to be herself, a self that is both female and male.

To keep the general audience happy, Caro continues to veil *Mulan*'s sexual orientation, favoring her femininity. The casting of Yifei Liu as *Mulan* has undermined any possibility of gender destabilizing. Liu has been catapulted to fame by playing lead roles in TV adaptations of Jing Yong's wuxia (swordsman) novels. Jing Yong is the pen name of Louis Cha, the preeminent wuxia novelist, one given to unabashed male fantasy in the proverbial *jianghu* (River and Lake), the alternate universe of swordplay akin to the lawless Wild West of Hollywood's Westerns. In fact, Liu has been designated by Jing Yong as the perfect candidate for his female protagonists in *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* (2003), *Chinese Paladin* (2005), and *The Return of the Condor Heroes* (2006). Treasured for her willowy femininity by Jing Yong and Caro, Liu pales in comparison to a number of other choices whose physique, carriage, and elocution problematize gender divisions, such as China's Yao Chen or Taiwan's Megan Lai. (Incidentally, Yao Chen is one of the three celebrities of the spotlight squad, along with Charlize Theron and Misty Copeland, featured in the Breitling women's watches ad in *The New York Times Style Magazine*, Women's Fashion, Feb. 21, 2021 as well as online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tLEI-0NF4>. Apparently, many Chinese, women and men alike, purchase this status symbol.) Truth be told, it may be Liu's teenage years in the US and English proficiency that land her this Disney role.

Thus, the question "Mulan Who?" suggests, racially and paternally, *Mulan Hu*, with "Hu" a double entendre for a Chinese surname as well as a term that lumps together all northern "barbarians," for she may well have been of non-Chinese descent. With regard to gender, it veils the question "Whose *Mulan*?", a phallic fetish into which the Chinese and the West, the male and female director and film industry, project longing for power, so long as this symbol returns to traditional femininity and commercial viability.

Gong Li who plays the witch rose to stardom in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1988) and several other films by the Chinese director. Gong Li of late has turned to international productions, ranging from the English-mangling Madame Hatsumomo in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) to Lady Murasaki in *Hannibal Rising* (2007) to Isabella in *Miami Vice* (2006) to Anna Lan-Ting in *Shanghai* (2010). The first two roles are Japanese, the latter two Chinese. Hawk's white face paint serves as a mask, accentuating the character's enigmatic, otherworldly aura. The face paint brings to mind the Great Wizard's Maori-style facial tattoo in *Matchless Mulan* (figure 1). A true, unadorned face would show oneself plainly. Masquerading lends itself to mystification, either the supernatural Hawk who transforms into a torrent of bats or the Great Wizard who dispatches a flood of rats against the matchless *Mulan*'s garrison. Ultimately, the Eastern witch and the Orient are shadows thrown by Niki Caro and Disney on the cave wall of, by, and for the West.

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