

'Shang-Chi' Proves to be a Master of Multiple Genres

Submitted by [JonHC](#) [1] on September 4, 2021 - 4:36pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There is an undeniable pleasure in watching films that don't take themselves too seriously. Nothing against the Nolans and Snyders of the comic book universe because they provide an essential service to the film community with their more grounded, dramatic approach. Even so, there is something about the Gunns and Waititis that reminds us that these types of films should be fun, even if they have little to no significance in a real-world setting, mostly leaving any social or political commentary buried in subtext if it's even present at all. In most cases, this approach is the safe one, even if it sometimes robs a film of the potential to be more. In this case, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* toes the line carefully, delivering exactly the energy we expect from a Marvel film and more, even if it leans too much into the humor at the expense of real depth.

In many American-led film productions that center around martial arts, there is a pitfall that often presents itself in what feels like fetishization. It usually appears in the form of focusing on the fighting to the extent that it becomes the only trait explored for certain, mostly Asian characters. Sure, it's only one step above Tom Cruise playing a samurai, or Matt Damon defending the Great Wall, but it's still a fairly common occurrence in today's media. Going into the film with this skepticism in mind, imagine my shock to see that within the first 5 minutes all of my concerns seemed to have been for nothing. From the very beginning, you can note the respect and reverence in the tone, showcasing several references in both storytelling and visual execution. While no specific cultures are pointed out, the Asian influences are abundant and appropriate.



Photo credit: Marvel Studios

Director-Writer Destin Daniel Cretton wears his influences on his sleeve, while still creating something that feels unique, even if it has all the staples of a Marvel universe film. You can see elements of films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the works of filmmaker Yimou Zhang, and even a hint of *Kung Fu Hustle*, but at no point does it feel like any sort of reproduction, but more of an updated homage that beautifully blends the historical with the modern. The most poignant and powerful scenes take place when no one is verbally speaking. Cretton understands the impact of allowing character interactions to tell the story without the use or need of words. There are several moments through sparring that we witness conversations being had only through movement and facial expressions. The choreography is as entrancing as it is dynamic, weaving a connection between characters that no amount of verbal exposition could ever hope to achieve. Much like the pacing, there is a thoughtful ebb and flow to every sequence, but especially the action ones. The compelling camera-work is what guides our attention, following the fluid movements of every fighting stance and inviting us in to be a part of it.

After the backstory, when we finally meet our hero (Simu Liu), we don't know what to expect from him, and that's exactly why our expectations are irrelevant. He isn't super-rich, doesn't possess any magical abilities, and we don't even know if he has any fighting abilities at this point. Shaun, AKA Shang-Chi, is not who he appears to be because, in reality, even he doesn't know who he truly is. Alongside his best friend Katy (Awkwafina), they lead relatively simple lives and share a fairly complacent outlook on life, which they use to mask a deeper issue. Like many first and second-generation non-white Americans discover, there is a difficult decision to be made about either absorbing your parent's cultural values and traditions or assimilating to American culture. We see both of our lead characters struggle with this very real phenomenon to the point that it becomes the central theme of the film. Seeing this play out on screen through Awkwafina's character was one of the small highlights I really enjoyed, even if the moments were short-lived, never fully going beyond the surface interactions to dive into this very real cultural occurrence. Instead, we follow this same theme through Shang-Chi's experiences, and while the same elements are present, it is a little removed from reality because of all the mysticism and dragons. A good companion piece to that discussion is another film Awkwafina stars in called *The Farewell*, which has a lot fewer physical battles, but many more moral and emotional ones.



Photo credit: Marvel Studios

Charm is never in short supply when it comes to comic book heroes, but Simu Liu and Awkwafina make you question if any previous Marvel property has had the level of charisma that this duo provides with such ease in *Shang-Chi*. The obvious answer is no, which makes their performances the main reason the viewer feels at home watching this, even when the film takes us to far-off, fantastical places. To temper the more light-hearted nature of our leads, we have legends like Michelle Yeoh and Wah Yuen to take the reins on some of the more traditional aspects. A common complaint I've had with many a Marvel villain is that they feel poorly developed, leaving their motivations often muddled or without any logical merit. As Xu Wenwu, the leader of the Ten Rings and father to Shang-Chi, Tony Leung adds a layer of gravitas to an already well-written character that elevates this film. Leung's performance displays both power and vulnerability, giving a real voice to his character's grief and making us question if his intentions are really those of a villain or of a man who is still battling with the loss of his love. There is something for everyone to enjoy, whether you're a fan of the old school, the modern school, or some mix in between. The representation alone is a refreshing turn for a universe whose diversity, until recently, rested solely on the strong back of *Black Panther*.

"Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings" in theaters on September 3rd. Featuring Simu Liu, Awkwafina, Michelle Yeoh, Tony Leung, Meng'er Zhang, Fala Chen, Wah Yuen, Florian Munteanu, Benedict Wong, and Ben Kingsley. Directed by Destin Daniel Cretton. Written by Destin Daniel Cretton, Dave Callaham, and Andrew Lanham. Rated "PG-13"



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By [JON ESPINO](#) [23]
Film & Television Show Critic
HollywoodChicago.com
jon@hollywoodchicago.com [22]

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