

[00:00] - Speaker 1 Okay. So all we need to know is that it is very hard to come up with a cold open on your own. It's much easier to do a cold open if you have somebody to talk with. So yeah. Welcome to episode one of maybe a podcast series about my thoughts on Shang-Chi.

[00:18] - Speaker 1 As of right now, the show does not have a name because I actually maybe planning on having a podcast with somebody else and I don't want to use our working name. Yeah, my name is Nathan, Nathan Kato. You can find me on Twitter at kahtonotkayto. I'll spell that later when we finish up episode one, but yeah, today is Saturday, the day after Shang-chi's release.

[00:44] - Speaker 1 Yeah, I saw the movie yesterday with a friend and neither of us are really big Marvel people, and I was really excited about it... more-- Half because it was a superhero movie and then half because Simu Liu is-has been incredible and it's been really cool just seeing him develop over the course of Kim's convenience and like seeing him in this completely different role is... It was really cool. And I also have a crush on him. So all of that aside, the movie was really great and I enjoyed it.

[01:24] - Speaker 1 I think that overall some of the pacing had some issues.

[01:29] - Speaker 1 I was telling my friend and some other friends who are bigger Marvel folks that I felt that the middle of the movie was kind of saggy a little bit, but overall the opening and the final sort of final climax and descent of the movie, those parts were pretty good. As I mentioned, this is probably going to be episode one because I've got a lot of thoughts and a lot of analysis on the movie, how it fits into culture and both the triumphs and the shortcomings of the movie.

[02:09] - Speaker 1 So since this is episode one, I figure we can start kind of a high level overview, and then we can start to make our way through the movie and all the different aspects of what I want to talk about, which is a lot. So as I mentioned, I'm on Twitter and yesterday I started making this huge thread of all my thoughts. And yeah, so if we're going to start at a high level, I think it'd probably be best to start off with the history of Shang-Chi, which if you're a big diehard Marvel person, it's also possible you don't know about Shang-Chi.

[02:50] - Speaker 1 Shang-Chi started off as the creation of a white author, and I just want to make sure that I've got this right. I don't remember who created him. Shang-Chi was created by Steve Englehart and Jim Starlin. So both white people and he debuted in 1973. So it's been like 50 years or so since his debut in the Marvel Comics universe.

[03:29] - Speaker 1 And all we really need to know about the previous iteration of Shang-Chi is he was born out of a lot of racist caricatures.

[03:41] - Speaker 1 His quote-unquote superpower was doing Kung Fu, which note to people who are trying to create Asian characters and especially Asian superheroes. Martial arts is not a

superpower. Anybody can learn how to do gongfu, anybody can learn how to do karate. Anybody can learn how to do any sort of martial arts. And we can see this at the Olympics.

[04:08] - Speaker 1 For example, judo is an Olympic sport. Judo is a Japanese martial art, and there are people from all countries around the world competing at the Olympic level in judo. Same thing for karate. I grew up in a pretty suburban area with predominantly white folks and karate was very white... Not white thing to do. But everybody in my second grade class did karate.

[04:42] - Speaker 1 I did not. Which is ironic because I'm half Japanese, but yeah, martial arts. They're not a super power. That's the baseline. The other quote unquote power that Shang-Chi had in the original comics was Chi manipulation, which is the Chinese word for air or energy has been regarded at least in Chinese philosophy as kind of life force and maybe not Chinese philosophy, but like Chinese schools of thought and thoughts on wellness and balance and everything, chi is an important concept. So for example, with like the principles of acupuncture, the needles are supposed to be interacting with specific chi points on your body to help promote energy flow. The what's the word I'm trying to think of the philosophy of home organization. Feng Shui is based on chi flow and what way you orient your bed in the bedroom. That's all based on chi flow.

[06:04] - Speaker 1 Chi has also made its appearance in Western media. You see, it was referenced in Avatar. So for example, Ty Lee is the circus acrobat who happens to know chi points and she can stop a bender from being able to bend their element by hitting chi points. This is also referenced in Naruto with the Hyuuga Clan and Byakugan, their special bloodline ability being able to see chi points. And that actually relates to pretty much directly with the Chakra concept in the Naruto series in that universe.

[06:55] - Speaker 1 So yeah, and that's not even Western media, wow. Sorry, they're going to be a lot of tangents because this is very much free form. I'm recording in my bedroom on voice memo on my phone. So there's truly no structure here, but the other piece of Western media that has incorporated chi has been the live action remake of Mulan from Disney.

[07:22] - Speaker 1 Apparently the villain in that movie can manipulate chi, and it's this weird thing that apparently only men can do, which is pretty stupid because chi is supposed to be like a universal concept of energy. It does not does not look at it's. Not like only men have this like everybody has it. So obviously the Mulan remake was pretty bad. I heard lots of bad things about it and I did not watch it because even though my rule for movies is to only watch something if it has a person of color in it, in it in a leading role.

[08:11] - Speaker 1 I was just so unimpressed by what was going on there. But anyways, that's sort of like a brief media history of chi and what that concept kind of means? Chi manipulation could be cool. But if the character was created by white creators and they don't really even know or respect the cultural background that comes from, then it's not really going to be

executed well, so that's Shang-Chi in the history of his superpowers and what that all means.

[08:45] - Speaker 1 And now we move into another character which the movie was able to redo as well. The leader of the Ten Rings in the movie is Xu Wenwu played by Tony Leung, and he is also a completely remade/redone character. Fans of the MCU will recognize the Mandarin as a villain. I believe that was from Iron Man Three and the Mandarin in the original comics was also present in the comics, but he was actually the official leader of the Ten Rings and Shang-Chi's father. And he was actually his civilian name, I believe, is Fu Manchu, which, yeah, it's not great, folks.

[09:40] - Speaker 1 It's bad. So the character of the Mandarin was based heavily on yellow peril stereotypes. At the time, he was skinny, he had long spindly fingers with long fingernails, he had the iconic facial hairstyle that is now called the Fu Manchu and that is truly because of this character. And yeah, it's just based in a lot of yellow peril and racism. So obviously that character needed a revamp 'cause nobody, and by nobody I really mean people of color are not interested in seeing stereotypes of themselves in modern media. That got redone and that's the extent of my knowledge, maybe I'll have a guest on or figure out how to do guest interviews and whatever, and we can talk a little bit more about history and stuff. But yeah. So the movie itself had to completely redo all of Shang-Chi's origins as well as Wenwu's origins as well to make this story actually better, and make it such that this character was rich and respected. Rich not in the monetary sense but rich as in like multifaceted and interesting.

The movie had to do a lot of work. I think that ultimately the movie succeeded in painting a picture of okay, so this is the world we're stepping into, this is who Wenwu is, and this is what the Ten Rings can do. Like I said, the movie I think does a really good job establishing that. The pacing suffers a little bit in the middle just because I think there are several elements of the story that I feel like we could have done without or just found another way to experience or to show those particular aspects, but other than that... The movie really had a lot to do, because Shang-Chi has not been in the zeitgeist and Shang-Chi I don't think has ever been in the zeitgeist. The people who are reading Marvel comics are generally not people of color and I think that shift has been a recent thing and definitely if you're a person of color and you're into comics, don't stop.

We as people of color being in these traditionally white spaces really forces those spaces to diversify. For example in terms of progress in terms of the MCU, the Marvel Comics Universe at least, we have a new Filipina hero named Wave. She was created by a Filipino artist and that's incredible. So as a result I know that Wave is going to be handled very well in her own stories and how she is constructed. Now on the opposite side of that, we have... Marvel also made these two superheroes who are supposed to be trans and non-binary and they were called Snowflake and Safe Space and... <sigh> as a queer person and as someone who is very left-leaning this is just. It's very upsetting to see creators weaponize that language that has been weaponized against queer folks and particularly Black folks, calling people snowflakes for trying to stand up for themselves and trying to advocate for the once again, the safe space that they

deserve. Because white folks are just so uncomfortable with allowing things that--white folks are just so unfamiliar with the concept of allowing people different from them to exist.

The white mindset is just so focused on assimilation and calling out things that are different. So that's an example of the same sort of creation that brings about shitty characters in my opinion. I would have loved to see trans and nonbinary superheroes created by trans and non-binary people. And honestly them being trans and nonbinary should be the least interesting thing about them. I know that we're getting a gay superhero in the Eternals, and if the movie is done right, that's just part of the character. And I believe the movie will be done very well, because it's being directed by Chloe Zhao and she has... the cast for Eternals looks amazing.

But anyways going back to character creation and how that affects things. Like Shang-Chi and the Mandarin were created by white folks in a time where the sentiment against China then was hostility and I think that still perpetuates to today, and especially we're seeing that because of the pandemic there's been a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. But those also, for those who are unaware, those actually have been at some level. It's not like these are new to the Asian American community, these are things that we've been dealing with for awhile. They never really went away. The most infamous one is... ohmygosh, I just need to check the name and make sure I'm not saying this incorrectly because that would be embarrassing. Let's see. Yes so in 1982, with Vincent Chin being killed because he was Asian in... I think it was Detroit right? Yes. In the metropolitan area of Detroit. So these... racism against Asians has a deep rooting in American history. Obviously not quite as deeply rooted as anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism, but anti-Asian racism is still part of American culture unfortunately. And this has been manifested in the slurs and also in how people are treating us.

At the beginning of the pandemic I do remember actually losing a potential friend because he made a joke about... there's a line from the movie The Big Lebowski where basically there's this one character says, oh, makes some comment about Chinaman or something, which... if we don't know that already, that's a racist term. And another person says, "oh the preferred term is Asian American," and so the joke was made in context with like coronavirus. And I told this guy hey look, that's not acceptable, it's really hurtful. And he was like "no, I don't think it is, it's actually kinda funny." And so as a result I blocked him. So all of this to say that anti-Asian sentiments are deeply rooted in the American psyche and in American culture and those are what originally gave shape to the creation of Shang-Chi and the creation of the Mandarin.

So now when we're comparing the old version of Shang-Chi to the new one, yes we do have... there is the martial arts aspect. And there's some pretty cool parts of the martial arts that we see when Wenu and Yingli first meet (so, Shang-Chi's mom and dad), when they meet in the opening we get some of that, some sort of extras which the martial arts going on. So for example, Wenwu is using kung-fu to control the Ten Rings and to basically augment his abilities. And Yingli is using a type of Chinese martial arts called baguazhang which translates to eight trigram palm. Now we're going to transition a little bit into choreography because this is another huge part of the movie. Baguazhang is for some of you folks who might have watched Avatar,

you might actually recognize this martial arts style because it is the martial arts style that was used to model airbending. Shang-Chi actually has a really cool nod to that in that whenever Yingli or even her sister Yingnan who is portrayed by Michelle Yeoh--whenever either of them are using baguazhang the wind actually moves with them in certain forms. Yingnan uses this against Shang-Chi when they're sparring and when he's like "oh, I think I got this," and she's just like, "ha haha, I don't think so," and unleashes that full power.

There's a little bit of mysticism there, but I think the really cool part of this comes down to the Ten Rings themselves. They seem to be this really cool artifact that... really cool is kind of an understatement. Yknow, you put them on and you are immortal for as long as you keep them on. And they appear to be individually controlled. I would really like a little bit more information and detail on how they're controlled and how Shang-Chi was actually able to control them so easily after Wenwu gives them to him. But they seem to be able to do really cool things. They can kinda do a rocket booster jump and like supernatural monkey bars. I think Shang-Chi uses them at some point when he's fighting what I affectionately call the Big Evil Flying Spaghetti Monster, he does some gymnastics there, some ring work to get back onto the dragon. And then of course they can be used as blunt force weapons. You see that a lot with, for example when Wenwu punches Shang-Chi into the lake, you see that Wenwu kills a member of the Iron Gang in retribution for killing his wife. There's a lot of that brute force. But then also it seems that the Ten Rings themselves have some sort of special ability or special power and that I feel like was seen when Yingli is able to sort of capture the Rings from Wenwu and turn them against him. And then the same thing with when Shang-chi does pretty much exactly the same thing. But the Ten Rings seem to be this really cool tool and I'm really actually very glad that the superpower, the super-heroness of Shang-Chi is tied to these things in addition to his martial arts abilities because as I said before, martial arts are not a superpower.

So there's a lot of legwork that had to be done with recreating this character more or less from scratch, and creating both Shang-Chi from scratch and Wenwu from scratch. They are both basically completely new characters, and I don't think any other Marvel movie has had to set the stage like this, so thoroughly like this because this movie was given to an Asian American creator and he said look, I'm not happy with the status quo and we need to rebuild this and he did an amazing job doing so, and no other Marvel movie has had to do this so far. I was talking to a friend about this last night on my way back from the movie theater and how Captain America has been pretty salient in the zeitgeist. He's easily recognizable. Same thing with Iron Man, and not just because of the.. those were the first two Marvel hero movies that were released. I remember growing up and watching, not Justice League, but like watching some other Marvel animated cartoons, and Captain America and Iron Man feature pretty heavily. And then even when we're moving into heroes of color, Black Panther I do remember seeing him in some episodes of Static Shock so I was very excited for Black Panther the movie. I didn't know too much about the character himself, but I had some exposure.

Shang-Chi I had no exposure to him growing up. I don't think I saw any Asian-American superheroes when I was growing up. I did some research and I found at least even on the DC

side of things there's not too much. There was like an Asian Green Lantern but he's like this little boy or something and a minor character in the DC universe. And the same sort of thing for Shang-Chi like I said, he's not been in the zeitgeist. He's not in the public consciousness and so Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings had a very big obstacle to overcome which is, how do I live up to the Marvel brand while also literally building a character from scratch and remaking this character into--and breathing new life into this character, breathing BETTER life into this character honestly--than the original source material. While I said the middle of the movie kind of sagged and the pacing seemed funky, ultimately all the work that was done in the middle paid off because I did enjoy, I enjoyed the ending of the movie. Not because the movie was ending but because the narrative arc had reached that moment where you're like oh okay, this is the beginning of this hero and this is where they start to put on the mantle and go forward. And all the characters were very understandable and likable, so ultimately even though I felt like the middle sagged and the pacing was a little funny, ultimately it was all deserved. So the movie itself, all the middle is necessary to set up the end which. That's great storytelling, that's great writing.

So yes. That's gonna be about it for episode 1\ . Later episodes I think we'll do some deep dives into characters and choreography and different aspects of the movie, I'm just trying to think about what I've got set up on my current twitter thread. I think some of it is character, some of it is the creatures we see in the movie, some of it is martial arts forms, and some of it is trying to unpack the Asian American-ness of this experience and what this actually means for the Asian American community. So yeah, I think with that, we'll call it the end of episode 1\ . This has been an untitled Shang-Chi TED Talk podcast. Once again I'm Nathan Kato, you can find me on twitter @kahtonotkayto and that is k-a-h-t-o-n-o-t-k-a-y-t-o. And for those of you who are inevitably going to be curious, that is a phonetic pronunciation guide for my last name. I hope that you find this interesting and hopefully you're looking forward to more. I will hopefully talk to y'all again soon. Thanks!