

Wuxia Cartoons, Age, & Gender

By Kristine Hassell

Getting older. Depending where you are on your own heroic journey, this is a glass half full/glass half empty situation. Maybe it was the first time you didn't bounce back from a gaming all-nighter or the first time you felt a creaking twinge in your bones when the weather changed. Regardless of where you are on that timeline, it's an inevitability for us all.

As I've gotten older (and slightly creakier), I started to notice an underrepresentation of older people in Western media. This packs more of an emotional wallop when you're looking for yourself in media and come up empty. It's even more of a gut punch when you try to find positive portrayals of older women and see less of a sampling.

Consider the one-dimensional ways that you encounter the elderly in media: dependent on others or as a burden to loved ones, mentally challenged or overly crabby, or reliving a second childhood. These can be facets of characterization but as defining characteristics, it's lazy storytelling, and we can do better than framing them with negative stereotypes that lack nuance representation.

For a myriad of reasons, these negative portrayals are a travesty because old folk are simply shuffled out of sight and othered. With the exception of the Vuvalini of Many Mothers from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, when is the last time you saw older women that far exceeded first glance expectations?

How we perceive the value of the elderly is important in determining whether we respect our seniors. Positive portrayals of those older than ourselves engenders empathy and facilitates better dialogue between generations to keep oral histories alive that might go untold. Their memories are a repository of knowledge, and without that history, we lose personal experience for our society.

You might be asking yourself, "Where does this come together in relation to a role-playing game?" Stay patient, young ones, I'm getting there.

Now I have a definite bias here. My Filipino grandparents lived next door, right across our shared driveway. I saw them nearly every day and did *mano po* from an early age, the traditional sign of respect toward elders. From stories they shared, I learned about my grandmother's resilience during the Japanese occupation of Manila and about the food stalls she ran in the market. As in most Filipino households, my grandmother was the matriarch and everyone listened to her when she spoke. Neither she nor my grandfather were subclass citizens in our family, they were cherished, respected, and revered.

Stay with me, the overlap is coming...

Without delving into a lengthy etymological history, an easy shorthand definition for wuxia is (wu) martial arts (xia) hero. Chances are you are familiar with wuxia even if you didn't know it. Have you seen *Kill Bill*; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *Kung Fu Panda*; or anything from the extended Avatarverse? Congratulations! You've seen media directly inspired by the genre, if not firmly in the genre itself. You can also find a wealth of wuxia films through streaming services and your local library.

When wuxia rules are applied, aging doesn't make one obsolete. In fact, when viewed through this fantastical lens, getting older yields a wealth of knowledge and skills that are highly prized and sought out. I don't know about you, but I'd easily accept Yu Shu Lien or Lin Beifong on my team any day.

Wuxia can set the table for a sumptuous storytelling feast awash with denizens who can bend elements to their will. This gives the MC and the players chances to conjure vivid imagery using fantastical elemental wuxia. Imagine bare toes gripping flat earth, and with a powerful foot thrust, terrain springs up where none existed before. The motion of deft fingers coaxing fire from empty air as protection. The wave of one's hand to draw moisture, creating an obfuscating fog. Anything is possible when you can bend the elements to your will!



If the idea of bending an element doesn't intrigue you, there are other playbooks available where you can create a capable fighter that doesn't shape the elements. The applications are limitless and only restricted by one's own imagination and the rules of the game. You might not have the experience of what it's like to be an old person, but it's all about perspective. Create a complex character of age, who is more than the wise mentor or the token old woman full of sage wisdom. Create an older combatant as equally potent as one of the younger characters, if not more so.

Don't let advanced age hinder your character. Make it a positive rather than a negative. We have all shared the trials of childhood but the converse is not true of old age. Getting older is an acquired situation, at times a privilege and a curse, that only comes to those who have weathered year after year of life. Older characters offer complexities not found in younger protagonists. In game, their experience can offer a player a wealth of backstory, knowledge, and support that a younger character could not.

In our ordinary lives, getting older provides its own set of problems: stiffening joints, weaker bones, and perhaps even the tragic loss of mental faculties. However in this wuxia universe, an older woman doesn't have to be defined by limitations of a physical form. People can shape elements, so plumb the depths of your imagination to make a vibrant older character rather than a contrivance to hasten the story along.

Skip the trope of using an older character as a plot device. No old masters passing the torch to their younger, more skilled, counterparts. Instead consider playing that old master as a valued member of the party. They have survived this long so clearly they know what they are doing! Explore the enormous potential for storytelling and role-play that character with all their personal history and skill set. I think you might discover a genuine appreciation for the silver-hairs and relish the opportunity to flesh out a memorable older character.

Ageism in media is pervasive and with a definite bias against older women. Aging is inescapable, but with age comes wisdom and life experience that can be valuable to your character's backstory! We might not be able to quickly shift the judgment against older women in society, but in this world, we can stop airbrushing the age away from capable women characters.