

FAMILY MEDIA/MOVIES

9 Family-Friendly Movies With Asian Protagonists

Go beyond 'Mulan' at your next family movie night with these films that celebrate AAPI stories

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The history of Asian representation in film is ... not good. But for parents who grew up with nothing better than cringey transfer student Long Duk Dong in “Sixteen Candles,” and worried the only Asian heroine they’d ever be able to offer their kids was Disney’s Mulan, things are starting to look up. This year we can even look forward to Shang-Chi, the first Asian superhero in the MCU (fingers crossed that it will be good). It can still take some searching to find family-friendly movies with Asian protagonists, though, so we’ve simplified your search with a few suggestions (complete with Common Sense Media age recommendations, where available).

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[‘Over the Moon \(https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/over-the-moon\)’](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/over-the-moon)

Ages 6 and older

Netflix original “Over the Moon” is truly original. Directed by former Disney character designer Glen Keane, “Over the Moon” has some Disney storytelling elements (dead mother, anyone?) but a completely fresh CG animation look. Chinese culture is baked into it, with the Autumn Moon Festival providing a backdrop for the story of a young girl resisting her widowed father’s remarriage and the addition of a stepbrother to her life. Young Fei Fei casually blends science and magic, building a rocket to travel to the moon for a visit with mythological Chang’e. The picturesque but modern-day Chinese setting gives way to a psychedelic moonscape (complete with literal Biker Chicks). Fei Fei is voiced by a young Filipino-American of Chinese descent, Cathy Ang, in an all-Asian voice cast that also features John Cho (of “Harold & Kumar” fame) as the father and Phillipa Soo (Eliza in “Hamilton”) as Chang’e.

[‘Johnny Tsunami \(https://www.commonsensemedia.org/tv-reviews/johnny-tsunami\)’](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/tv-reviews/johnny-tsunami)

Ages 7 and older

This Disney Channel Original Movie is a kids' fish-out-of-water story — or should we say, surfer out of water? Johnny Kapahaala (played by Brandon Baker, who has European and Filipino ancestry) is uprooted from Hawaii to Vermont when his dad (Seattle-based Yuji Okumoto, owner of Kona Kitchen) is transferred for work. Far from the beach, he attends a snobby private school attended by skiers. But inspired by his world-famous surfer grandfather (Cary-Hiroiyuki Tagawa), he sides with the town kids and takes up snowboarding. Hijinks ensue. It's silly, but kind of fun.

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'Big Hero 6 (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/big-hero-6>)'

Ages 7 and older

"Big Hero 6" owes as much to Japanese anime's go-team and giant robot genres as to its Disney pedigree, with the twist that this giant robot is a health-care worker. Similar to the "NeoTokyo" of numerous anime titles, San Fransokyo is a futuristic city filled with mad scientists, genius teens and incredible technology. And while there are plenty of big action scenes with some violence, ultimately the story is about replacing vengeance with justice and taking care of the people who matter to you. Asian American actors voice the Asian American characters: Hiro (Ryan Potter), Tadashi (Daniel Henney) and Go Go Tomago (Jamie Chung).

'Raya and the Last Dragon (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/raya-and-the-last-dragon>)'

Ages 8 and older

Could it be that Disney has learned its lesson? After decades of shameful, racist gaffes followed by a generation of one-princess-per-ethnicity, Disney gives us "Raya and the Last Dragon." Returning to the warrior princess theme after Moana's

peacemaking in Polynesia, Raya searches for the last dragon in a fantasy world inspired by the cultures of Southeast Asia. Raya is voiced by Vietnamese-American Kelly Marie Tran, with a mostly Asian voice cast that includes stars Sandra Oh, Akwafina and Gemma Chan.

'Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior
(<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/wendy-wu-homecoming-warrior>)'

Ages 8 and older

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Imagine if “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” were a kids’ show starring an Asian-American (Brenda Song) and you’ve got “Wendy Wu: Homecoming Warrior.” It’s a silly movie full of comic training montages, Indiana Jones-type cursed artifacts, and representations of Chinese history and contemporary California teen culture that are equally shallow and inaccurate. It’s also a rare “chosen one” story with a butt-kicking female protagonist who learns to appreciate her heritage. And it’s a ton of fun. My kids watched it over and over again in elementary school, and thanks to Wendy Wu, they still believe meditation is best with potato chips and the mantra “Yummm.”

'Kubo and the Two Strings
(<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/kubo-and-the-two-strings>)'

Ages 9 and older

Produced by Laika, the studio that made “Coraline” and “The Boxtrolls,” “Kubo and the Two Strings” has a darker vibe that can veer into territory that might be too scary for sensitive kids. In a fantasy world based on feudal Japan, Kubo is a young boy with a very powerful magical family — many of whom are antagonists — and only one eye.

Armed with a magical shamisen, he embarks on a beautifully animated hero's journey with powerful themes of friendship, empathy and courage. "Star Trek" legend George Takei voices the kindly Hosato, but unfortunately, seven of the nine main roles in this otherwise excellent movie are voiced by white actors.

'The Breadwinner (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/the-breadwinner>)'

Ages 11 and older

Based on the book by Deborah Ellis, this animated film set in the Central Asian country of Afghanistan follows 11-year-old Parvana (Saara Chaudry), who disguises herself as a boy to provide for her family after the Taliban arrests her father.

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'Crazy Rich Asians (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/crazy-rich-asians>)'

Ages 13 and older

Okay, it's definitely not for little kids. But your teen will love it. This frothy romance simultaneously critiques and celebrates the conspicuous consumption of '80s movies with a killer soundtrack and drool-inducing scenes of food and clothes. Gemma Chan demolishes Eurocentric beauty standards; Constance Wu and Henry Golding are #couplegoals; Akwafina steals every scene she's in; and Michelle Yeoh proves she rules the screen in every language. (For a somewhat more wholesome romantic comedy, try the "[To All the Boys I've Loved Before](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/to-all-the-boys-ive-loved-before)" series.)

'The Paper Tigers (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6060444/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1)'

Ages 13 and older

In theaters right now, “The Paper Tigers” is a kung fu comedy about three prodigies who have grown into washed-up, middle-aged men. But when their master is murdered, they must juggle adult responsibilities and old grudges to avenge his death. “The Paper Tigers” is a home-town success story, written and directed by Olympia native Quoc Bao Tran, funded by Kickstarter, and starring Alain Uy, Ron Yuan and Mykel Shannon Jenkins.

There is no such thing as a perfect movie, especially when it comes to representation. No group of people is a monolith, so no single movie can accurately represent them. And for now, even a single movie can be hard to come by. There are PG-13 options, but the Korean Wave has yet to crash upon PG shores, and this list still lacks even a single Filipino or Indian protagonist. (As important as “The Jungle Book” was to my childhood, I can’t in good conscience use Mowgli as an example of Indian representation.)

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And of course, representation is only one piece of a more equitable media. Who tells the story — the writers, directors, even technical crew — and the executives who greenlight the projects should all be representative of the diverse world we live in. But for our kids, the windows and mirrors provided by AAPI stories, even when they are flawed, are priceless.

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