The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

The Eagle Huntress

If you are a parent — particularly a father — and you have a daughter, or if you like great movie scenery, or even if you are merely a curmudgeon with gender axes to grind, here's a fun holiday season idea: Go see "The Eagle Huntress" at Sisters Movie House.

Without ruining the narrative, here's the basic breakdown of a wonderfully true story: A 13-year-old Kazakh girl in Mongolia, Aisholpan, wants to continue 12 generations of her family legacy by becoming an eagle hunter. Her father, Nurgaiv, who makes his living driving herds of goats and cattle across the frigid Mongolian Steppe, is a two-time winner of the prestigious Golden Eagle Festival near the outback village of Olgii, where eagle hunters gather annually to be judged in their mastery of hunting game with eagles.

Here's the rub: in the deeply traditional and conservative Kazakh culture —and Aisholpan is Muslim — females just don't hunt with eagles.

And so the stage is set for Aisholpan to capture and raise her own eagle, and for Nurgaiv to train her in the necessary skills and arts to compete against the men in a centuries-old cultural tradition. Together, they must overcome their own doubts, and the considerable barriers of a culture trapped somewhere between Genghis Khan, Mohamed, crank-started Soviet cargo trucks, and yurts with solar panels.

There is a marvelous series of interviews with elder Kazakh eagle hunters, bedecked in traditional garb, looking every bit the wind-blasted, frostbitten, slightly mystical and contemplative keepers of ancient tradition. They are asked about the prospect of a female, particularly a young female, learning to hunt with an eagle and are unanimous in their rejection of the notion. Some of the elders are more vehement than others, some think it is a bad joke, and at least one insists that a woman's job is to keep the ger warm and make curd.

The film does not, thankfully, openly editorialize on their positions. Instead, the audience is allowed to form its own opinion, and to develop allegiances based on Aisholpan's intense desire to compete in this exclusively male activity. And the film does a fine, understated job of revealing her father's unflagging belief in her fitness, and his own commitment to prepare her for the rigors of eagle hunting.

One of the finer moments of the film records Nurgaiv speaking with his own elderly father — himself an eagle hunter — in the thin, cold light outside of the family ger in the Altai mountains. Nurgaiv asks the old man if he will give his blessing to Aisholpan's desires, the old man consents, and the three of them then pray together.

The blessing sequence is deeply moving on many levels. As father to a young woman who is studying and striving to make her mark in the world of agricultural science — a sexist universe if there ever was one — it is a reminder of how much pride we have in our daughters, how much hope for their triumphs in a competitive world, and how critical the role we must play in preparing our young women to compete with and to beat the men at our own games.

One of the finer elements of the film is that nothing is given to Aisholpan. She earns the respect she so ultimately deserves. Her father is a fantastic teacher and guide, but her success is the result of her own drive, determination, and admirable grit.

It has been suggested that Aisholpan's strength is derived from the role she assumed after her brother joined the Mongolian Army. With her brother's absence, Aisholpan took over his laborious and traditionally male chores. However tempered, her success is made sweeter by her incredible drive, though even in victory not everyone is convinced of her fitness to be called an eagle hunter.

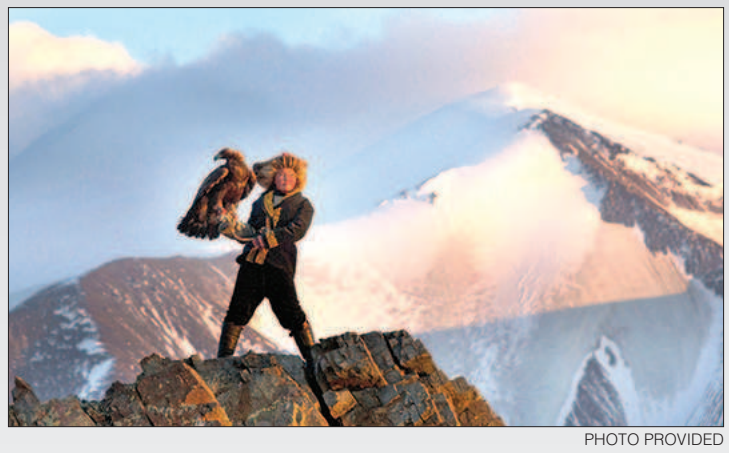

PHOTO PROVIDED

"The Eagle Huntress" offers stunning photography.

It is, I suppose, a Kazakh version of the glass ceiling. In the film, Nurgaiv handles Aisholpan's detractors by refusing to feed their negativity, by voicing his quiet confidence in her abilities, and by continuing to encourage his daughter's mindset so that she begins to see herself as a qualified equal.

From the beginning, Nurgaiv is a rock of fatherhood, lowering Aisholpan by rope over a sheer cliff face into an eagle's nest, teaching her to train the eagle to hunt and to be recalled, and ultimately riding by her side into the rugged Altai mountains for a final test, over rivers frozen solid and through deep, rocky snowbanks, to hunt foxes with her eagle, and to finally silence the critics and rigid cultural gatekeepers.

Aisholpan is not the first modern Kazakh female eagle huntress. That title belongs to Makpal Abdrazakova — now a successful lawyer — and Stanford researcher Adrienne Mayor reports evidence of female eagle hunters from 10th-century Persia. But Aisholpan's story, well-told, is a reminder to all of us that we are never more stupid or cruel to each other as when we insist on tired assumptions and creaky traditions, or enforce them without honest examination.

And for modern American fathers of young women, Nurgaiv's refusal to bow to criticism or cemented tradition, and to see his daughter as the natural and equal inheritor of 12 generations of knowledge, serves as a poignant and beautifully rendered example of how we might best serve our daughters — as they develop their considerable passions, and strike out into the world in pursuit of success.