

Tradition, Family Issues, and Educational Values in a Chinese-Canadian Living in Toronto: Analysis on *Turning Red* (2022)

Jihan Medina Ramadhani¹, Cipto Wardoyo²

^{1,2} English Literature, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author

Jihan Medina Ramadhani

jihanmr17@gmail.com

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Abstract: This research examines the animated film *Turning Red* as a narrative that explores cultural identity, generational conflict, and self-discovery within the Chinese-Canadian diaspora. By employing qualitative research and narrative text analysis, the research focuses on how the film portrays the tension between traditional values and modern influences in shaping the protagonist Mei Lee's identity. The story follows Mei, a 13-year-old Toronto teenager, as she navigates adolescence, family expectations, and her transformation into a red panda, which symbolizes emotional change. The film highlights the clash between Mei and her mother Ming, who adheres strictly to cultural traditions, emphasizing Mei's desire to forge her own path. Through empathy and communication, Mei and Ming reconcile their differences, highlighting the importance of familial relationships. The red panda serves as a powerful symbol for self-acceptance and the blending of heritage with personal growth. Overall, *Turning Red* offers valuable insights into cultural representation, identity formation, and the universal theme of family.

Keywords: family value, generational conflict, cultural identity, tradition

INTRODUCTION

Disney's animated film *Turning Red* tells the story of Meilin, a 13-year-old Chinese-Canadian girl whose life is disrupted by an ancient "curse" as she navigates puberty. Directed by Domee Shi, a Chinese-Canadian filmmaker also known for her Oscar winning short *Bao*, the film explores themes of family, cultural identity, and personal growth. In *Bao*, a mother copes with feelings of loss by imagining a dumpling as her child, only to confront the pain of letting go. Similarly, *Turning Red* expands on these themes by focusing on a child's perspective, illustrating the emotional challenges of adolescence and familial expectations. The film combines humor and heart to address complex issues of identity and generational dynamics.

The Chinese-Canadian diaspora reflects a blend of strong traditions, close community bonds, and cultural adaptation. With over 1.7 million Chinese-Canadians, this group has historically built supportive networks to preserve their heritage while navigating life in Canada (Chan, 2021). These communities have provided resilience against discrimination, helping individuals maintain cultural identity while adapting to modern Canadian society. The ongoing balance between tradition and adaptation underscores the challenges of integrating cultural values within a multicultural framework. This dynamic is essential in understanding how diasporic identities evolve over time.

Representation in the media plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and fostering understanding of underrepresented communities. Films like *Turning Red* offer audiences a nuanced view of diasporic experiences, focusing on themes such as intergenerational relationships, cultural preservation, and identity formation. By addressing these topics, the film not only entertains but also serves as an educational tool, promoting empathy and awareness about the challenges faced by immigrant families. Accurate portrayals of these communities in media help dismantle stereotypes,

providing a voice to individuals and groups often marginalized in mainstream narratives (Igartua & Frutos, 2017). As a cultural text, *Turning Red* enriches the discourse on representation, offering a rare yet meaningful depiction of Chinese-Canadian life.

This study examines *Turning Red* as a lens to explore the complex interplay between cultural heritage and personal growth within a diasporic context. Mei's transformation into a red panda symbolizes her inner emotional journey and highlights the tensions inherent in balancing familial expectations with her burgeoning independence. The film presents a compelling narrative of a young individual navigating the dualities of her identity as both Chinese and Canadian. Its focus on generational conflict, particularly between Mei and her overprotective mother, Ming, reflects universal struggles faced by immigrant families in reconciling traditional values with modern aspirations (Attiba, 2024).

Moreover, the film underscores the importance of empathy and communication in bridging generational divides. The climactic resolution, where Mei and Ming come to a mutual understanding, signifies healing and growth, emphasizing the possibility of harmonizing cultural heritage with individual identity. By combining relatable family dynamics with culturally specific themes, *Turning Red* resonates with audiences globally, offering insights into the complexities of immigrant family life. Ultimately, it stands as a testament to the power of storytelling in fostering cross-cultural understanding and celebrating diversity within a multicultural society (Guo et al., 2022).

Concept of cultural identity suggests that identity isn't static but a constantly evolving process. According to Hall (2015), cultural identity is a "production" shaped by historical events, social interactions, and personal experiences. He highlights that identity in diasporic communities is influenced by shared cultural traits as well as individual differences shaped by unique experiences (Hall, 2015). This perspective

captures the complexity of cultural identity, especially for individuals navigating multiple cultural influences and balancing their sense of self in diverse contexts. Hall outlines two key aspects of cultural identity: similarity and continuity, which emphasize shared experiences, and difference and rupture, which recognize the unique challenges individuals face when adapting to new environments. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of Chinese-Canadian youth in *Turning Red*. It shows how their identities are shaped by both cultural heritage and modern Canadian life.

In the film *Turning Red*, generational conflict theory elucidates the challenges faced by the protagonist as she navigates her dual identity. The narrative portrays intergenerational tensions within her family, highlighting how these conflicts lead to misunderstandings and emotional strain. Simultaneously, the film underscores the potential for dialogue and reconciliation between generations. Research by Choi et al. (2007) indicates that intergenerational cultural dissonance can increase parent-child conflict, which in turn weakens positive parent-child bonding and contributes to youth problem behaviors.

RESEARCH METHOD

In the film *Turning Red*, the protagonist, 13-year-old Mei Lee, undergoes her first transformation into a red panda during an emotional outburst. This transformation symbolizes her entry into adolescence and the emotional struggles it entails. The red panda is deeply tied to Mei's family history and the legacy of her ancestor, Sun Yee, highlighting the connection between her emotions and cultural heritage. This interplay of personal and cultural elements sets the stage for the film's exploration of identity and relationships. This analysis aligns with the findings of Choi et al. (2007), who examined intergenerational cultural dissonance and its impact on parent-child conflict and youth problem behaviors among Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrant families. Their study underscores the significance of cultural heritage in shaping family dynamics and individual identity.

One pivotal scene involves Mei's mother, Ming, discovering Mei's crush on a local boy named Devon. Ming's overprotective reaction leads to a public confrontation, leaving Mei humiliated and deepening the rift between them. This moment captures the tension between traditional parental expectations and Mei's need for independence. It also emphasizes the generational conflict that often arises in diasporic families. The clash underscores the struggle to balance cultural heritage with personal growth, a recurring theme in the film. As noted by Lau et al. (2005), discrepancies in acculturation levels between parents and adolescents can lead to increased family conflict and youth behavioral issues.

In contrast, Mei's transformation into a red panda and her friends' enthusiastic acceptance of this change highlight the power of friendship and peer support during challenging times, contrasting sharply with her mother's disapproval. This dynamic reflects Mei's internal struggle to reconcile the conflicting influences of familial expectations and her desire for acceptance among her peers. As noted by Putri and Irawan (2022) that the film captures the joys, changes, and awkwardness of puberty from the female perspective,

emphasizing how Mei's friendships provide a sense of belonging that helps her navigate the complexities of growing up. The support from her friends allows Mei to embrace her identity, illustrating that connection and understanding from peers can be crucial in overcoming personal challenges during adolescence.

Towards the climax of *Turning Red*, Mei enters the astral plane and encounters a younger version of her mother, Ming, revealing that Ming also faced similar pressures and insecurities during her adolescence. This moment fosters empathy within Mei, bridging the emotional gap between them. The film's turning point culminates in an intense showdown where Mei and Ming, both in their red panda forms, confront their emotions and desires for control. This scene symbolizes their journey toward mutual understanding and acceptance. As highlighted by Abdulbaki (2022), the confrontation allows Mei to break the cycle of generational trauma, as she learns to embrace her identity while helping her mother confront her own past struggles. This pivotal moment emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and accepting change in their relationship, ultimately leading to a more profound connection between mother and daughter.

In the resolution of *Turning Red*, Mei chooses to keep her red panda form, fully embracing her identity and heritage. This decision marks a significant shift in her relationship with Ming, who ultimately recognizes Mei's need for independence. The reconciliation between mother and daughter underscores the film's central message of balancing familial expectations with personal authenticity. By analyzing these key scenes, this research reveals how *Turning Red* explores the intricate dynamics of cultural identity, generational conflict, and family relationships in the context of the Chinese-Canadian diaspora. As noted by Tanzil and Andriano (2024), the film emphasizes effective communication and conflict management within familial relationships, showcasing the importance of understanding and acceptance across generations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings from the qualitative analysis of *Turning Red*, focusing on its themes and their educational implications. The film's exploration of cultural identity, intergenerational communication, and emotional regulation offers valuable insights for fostering multicultural perspectives and character education in the classroom. The themes explored through the film provide a platform for meaningful discussions on empathy, self-awareness, and the challenges of navigating multiple cultural identities. The findings also suggest that *Turning Red* can be a useful resource for promoting critical thinking and emotional intelligence among students. The table below presents the key findings from the thematic analysis conducted.

Tabel 1. Exploration of Themes in *Turning Red* and Their Pedagogical Applications with Supporting References

| Theme | Example from <i>Turning Red</i> | Pedagogical Implication | Supporting References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intergenerational Communication | Mei and Ming's dialogue at the film's climax, where fears and expectations are addressed. | Role-playing activities to foster empathy and active listening | Fitriani et al. (2024) supports the role of dialogic pedagogy in enhancing communication skills; contrasts with strict didactic approaches. |
| Navigating Cultural Diversity | Mei balancing Chinese cultural values with Canadian modern life, as seen in her love for 4*Town concerts. | Reflective essays on students' cultural experiences to promote awareness of cultural preservation and assimilation. | Banks (2019) emphasizes the importance of multicultural education; contradicts assimilationist perspectives like Huntington (2004). |
| Tradition and Modernity | Mei's struggle between honoring traditions and embracing modern Canadian life. | Discussions or activities about cultural heritage, globalization, and how they shape identity. | McCallum (2017) explores how cultural heritage and globalization intersect, fostering appreciation for cultural diversity. |
| Family Dynamics and Generational Expectations | Mei's conflict with her mother Ming regarding freedom and tradition. | Role-playing to explore emotional strain and intergenerational conflict resolution skills. | Vavrus (2002) highlights intergenerational conflicts in Chinese-Canadian family dynamics. |
| Identity and Self-Discovery | Mei choosing to attend a 4*Town concert despite her mother's disapproval. | Reflective essays or group discussions on self-discovery and embracing one's identity. | Vavrus (2002) encourages students to reflect on their own journeys of self-discovery and the importance of independence. |
| Symbolism and Cultural Metaphors | The red panda as a metaphor for Mei's transformation and self-empowerment. | Visual storytelling or creative writing about personal symbols of transformation. | Vavrus (2002) discusses the application of cultural metaphors in narratives, fostering cross-cultural understanding. |

One of the central educational aspects highlighted in *Turning Red* is its depiction of intergenerational communication and cultural reconciliation, which resonates deeply with the principles of dialogic pedagogy. For example, the emotional climax of the film, where Mei and her mother,

Ming, openly address their fears and expectations, serves as a model for fostering constructive dialogue. This scenario can be adapted into classroom discussions or role-playing activities that encourage students to explore the value of active listening, empathy, and expressing personal identity in respectful ways. Educators can leverage these moments to teach conflict resolution and emotional intelligence, skills essential for personal development and social interaction. Supporting this perspective, Williams and Claxton (2017) emphasize that intergenerational learning fosters significant dialogue between different age groups, enhancing understanding and empathy while addressing cultural and emotional complexities. Their research highlights how such interactions can lead to transformative educational experiences that promote reconciliation and deeper connections among participants.

Additionally, the film's portrayal of Mei's dual identity as a Chinese-Canadian teenager underscores the complexities of navigating cultural diversity, making it a powerful teaching tool for multicultural education. Through Mei's experiences, students can critically examine themes of cultural preservation and assimilation, which are relevant in today's globalized classrooms. Assignments such as reflective essays or group discussions on Mei's struggle to balance familial expectations with personal aspirations can help students articulate their own experiences with cultural identity. This process not only builds self-awareness but also fosters an appreciation for the diverse backgrounds of their peers, creating an inclusive learning environment.

Furthermore, *Turning Red* presents the red panda as a multifaceted symbol that offers profound educational implications. Initially perceived as a source of shame and disruption, the red panda evolves into a symbol of empowerment and acceptance. This transformation mirrors the personal growth students often experience as they navigate adolescence. Teachers can use this metaphor to inspire discussions about self-acceptance, resilience, and the importance of embracing one's unique traits. Classroom activities could include creative writing assignments where students explore their own "red panda" moments, challenges that have shaped their identities and personal values.

Another critical theme in the film is the tension between tradition and modernity, which provides a rich platform for exploring historical and cultural contexts. For instance, Mei's struggle to honor her family's traditions while embracing her individuality parallels the experiences of many students who straddle multiple cultural identities. Teachers can use this theme to introduce discussions about cultural heritage, the impact of globalization, and the importance of intercultural understanding. These lessons can be further enriched by integrating cross-curricular activities, such as comparing the film's themes with historical accounts of immigration or literary works addressing similar issues. Supporting this perspective, Bayar (2022) discusses how *Turning Red* effectively illustrates the complexities of navigating cultural identities, emphasizing the importance of understanding both traditional values and modern influences in shaping one's identity.

The film also underscores the importance of emotional regulation and self-awareness, particularly through Mei's

transformation into the red panda during moments of stress or strong emotions. This aspect aligns with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks, which emphasize skills like self-management and relationship building. By analyzing Mei's journey, students can gain insights into managing their emotions and understanding how external pressures influence their behavior. Teachers can incorporate mindfulness exercises or collaborative projects that encourage students to reflect on their emotional triggers and coping mechanisms, thus enhancing their SEL competencies. Supporting this idea, O'Brien (2022) highlights how *Turning Red* serves as a valuable tool for teaching emotional regulation, illustrating the significance of embracing one's feelings and developing coping strategies in a supportive environment.

Incorporating *Turning Red* into English language education also offers opportunities to develop language skills in a meaningful and engaging context. Activities such as script analysis, character studies, or creative reinterpretations of key scenes allow students to practice reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills while engaging with relatable content. These tasks not only enhance linguistic abilities but also encourage students to critically evaluate the film's messages and their relevance to real-world issues.

Integrational Communication

Turning Red underscores the importance of intergenerational communication in addressing cultural and generational divides within immigrant families. Through the dynamic between Mei Lee and her mother, Ming, the story reveals how a lack of open dialogue can widen the gap between traditional expectations and the need for personal self-expression. Ming, deeply rooted in traditional Chinese values, finds it difficult to comprehend the changes Mei undergoes as a modern teenager in Canada. Meanwhile, Mei feels overwhelmed by her mother's high standards, leaving her reluctant to share her true emotions.

The film also highlights how open communication can nurture understanding and harmony despite differences. Mei's transformation into the red panda represents her internal struggles while also opening the door for meaningful conversations with her family. Throughout this journey, Mei and her mother come to realize that their bond doesn't need to revolve around strict conformity but can thrive through mutual understanding and respect for their individuality. As Fitriani et al. (2024) notes, fostering culturally responsive communication is essential for bridging generational gaps and promoting empathy within families.

This story delivers an important message: intergenerational communication not only helps resolve conflicts but also strengthens relationships. On a larger scale, the film's theme resonates with anyone navigating cultural, generational, or ideological differences, emphasizing the pivotal role of communication in bridging diverse perspectives and experiences.

Navigating Cultural Diversity

Turning Red delves into the challenges and opportunities of embracing cultural diversity, particularly within immigrant families. The story follows Mei Lee, a 13-year-old Chinese-Canadian girl, as she navigates the

complexities of honoring her traditional heritage while adapting to modern Canadian influences. Mei's family places great emphasis on their cultural traditions, evident in their dedication to ancestral practices and her mother Ming's strict adherence to traditional values. Meanwhile, Mei is drawn to elements of Western culture, such as pop music, friendships, and a growing sense of independence, which often conflict with her family's expectations.

This cultural tension is symbolized by Mei's transformation into a red panda, a metaphor that reflects both her ancestral ties and the challenges of growing up in a multicultural society. The red panda represents her struggle to balance her cultural roots with her personal growth. Mei's journey to integrate these aspects of her identity sheds light on the broader experience of navigating cultural diversity in today's globalized world.

The film underscores the importance of valuing and understanding multiple cultural perspectives. As Banks (2019) notes, embracing cultural diversity does not mean abandoning one's heritage but rather finding ways to blend it with new experiences. Through open communication and mutual respect, Mei and her family show that harmony can emerge when different values and identities are recognized and celebrated. These narrative invites viewers to reflect on their own experiences with cultural diversity, fostering greater empathy and appreciation for the richness of multicultural societies.

Tradition and Modernity

Turning Red vividly portrays the tension between traditional Chinese culture and contemporary Canadian life through the experiences of Mei Lee, a 13-year-old grappling with adolescence. Mei's heritage forms a central part of her identity, reflected in her family's devotion to ancestral temples and her mother Ming's adherence to traditional values. Simultaneously, Mei's attraction to the Western influences of pop music, crushes on boys, and her pursuit of freedom illustrate the clash of cultures.

This conflict is symbolized by Mei's transformation into a red panda, a metaphor laden with cultural and emotional significance. The panda's relationship with menstruation in Chinese culture explains Mei's journey into adulthood, blending tradition with modernity. From an educational perspective, this theme offers a lens through which students can explore how cultural heritage and globalization intersect. Teachers can design activities encouraging students to reflect on their own cultural experiences, fostering an appreciation for diversity and the importance of heritage in shaping identity.

The intergenerational challenges depicted in the film provide further opportunities for educational discussion. As McCallum (2017) emphasizes, understanding cultural responsiveness is critical for educators to help students navigate their identities effectively. Mei's struggle to meet her mother's expectations while defining her individuality mirrors the broader experience of immigrant families navigating dual identities. Classroom debates or reflective writing assignments could explore these dynamics, allowing students to empathize with characters and develop critical insights into cultural adaptation and identity formation.

Family Dynamics and Generational Expectations

The complex dynamic between Mei and her mother captures the generational conflicts often present in diaspora families. Ming's overprotectiveness and strict adherence to tradition frequently clash with Mei's growing desire for autonomy. A pivotal scene occurs when Ming publicly confronts Mei over her secret crush, highlighting their divergent perspectives on freedom and identity.

This portrayal aligns with research on Chinese-Canadian families, where intergenerational conflicts arise from differing cultural norms. First-generation parents often practice authoritative parenting rooted in values of success and filial piety, while their children, influenced by Western ideals, learn about individuality. These tensions can cause emotional strain, as evidenced by Mei's rebellion against her mother's expectations.

Educators can utilize this theme to discuss the psychological and emotional effects of intergenerational conflict. Activities like role-playing or collaborative storytelling can help students explore how communication and empathy can bridge generational divides. By analyzing Ming's transformation from an authoritative figure to a more understanding parent, students can learn about the importance of compromise and mutual respect in family relationships.

Moreover, *Turning Red* highlights the potential for healing when families engage in open dialogue. As Vavrus (2002) notes, culturally responsive teaching is essential for addressing the complexities of intergenerational dynamics, emphasizing emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and empathy. By incorporating these lessons into classroom discussions, educators can foster a deeper understanding of familial relationships and the cultural factors influencing them.

Identity and Self-Discovery

Mei's journey of self-discovery is a universal narrative that resonates with adolescents, particularly those navigating multicultural environments. Her transformation into the red panda represents her emotional upheaval and struggle to balance her familial obligations with her personal desires. This metaphor captures the complexity of adolescence, marked by identity exploration and the reconciliation of conflicting influences.

One of the film's most impactful moments occurs when Mei chooses to attend a 4-Town concert despite her mother's disapproval. This decision signifies her assertion of independence and her willingness to embrace her multifaceted identity. From an educational standpoint, this theme can inspire students to reflect on their own journeys of self-discovery. Assignments such as reflective essays or group discussions can encourage students to articulate their experiences, promoting self-awareness and confidence.

Additionally, Mei's acceptance of her panda form symbolizes the importance of embracing one's unique qualities. Educators can use this symbolism to teach concepts like resilience, self-acceptance, and personal growth. As Vavrus (2002) emphasizes, culturally responsive teaching is vital in helping students navigate their identities, allowing them to draw connections between their personal experiences and broader social themes. For instance, students could

analyze how Mei's journey reflects broader social themes, such as the tension between individuality and conformity, and relate these themes to their own lives.

Symbolism and Cultural Metaphors

The red panda serves as a powerful symbol of transformation, growth, and empowerment in *Turning Red*. Initially perceived as a curse, the panda evolves into a source of strength and self-expression for Mei. This transformation reflects her journey toward self-acceptance and her ability to integrate her cultural heritage with her modern aspirations.

Educators can explore the symbolism of the red panda through activities like visual storytelling or creative writing, encouraging students to interpret and apply metaphors in their own narratives. Discussions can also delve into how cultural symbols carry different meanings across contexts, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

Moreover, the reconciliation between Mei and Ming underscores the potential for generational healing through empathy and mutual understanding. As Vavrus (2002) emphasizes, culturally responsive teaching plays a crucial role in helping students navigate complex identities and relationships. This resolution offers a teachable moment about conflict resolution and emotional growth. By analyzing this aspect of the film, students can gain insights into the importance of dialogue and compromise in overcoming differences.

CONCLUSION

The film *Turning Red* offers an insightful look into family values within a Chinese-Canadian household, making it a useful resource for discussions on cultural diversity, character education, and emotional growth in educational settings. The story explores the complex relationship between Mei and her mother, focusing on how Mei balances her desire to honor her family with the need to express her individuality. This theme is relatable for many students, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, who may face similar challenges in navigating family expectations.

One standout theme in the film is the pressure to honor one's parents, reflected in Mei's statement: "Number one rule in my family: honor your parents. They're the supreme beings who gave you life." This idea of filial responsibility can create meaningful classroom discussions about cultural values and their impact on personal development. Teachers can use Mei's experiences to guide students in reflecting on their own family dynamics, helping them understand the balance between respecting traditions and finding their own paths. Activities like group discussions or reflective writing can encourage cultural awareness and empathy among students.

The film also addresses generational conflicts, particularly the tension between traditional values and personal autonomy. Mei's transformation into a red panda symbolizes her internal struggle, making it an effective tool for exploring themes of identity and self-discovery. In the classroom, students can analyze the symbolism of the red panda and connect it to their own experiences of growth and cultural adaptation. This activity not only improves critical thinking but also encourages self-reflection, helping students to better understand their own development.

Additionally, *Turning Red* highlights the role of communication and empathy in resolving family conflicts. Mei's journey with her mother shows how open dialogue and understanding can help bridge generational differences. This theme aligns with character education, as it promotes emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills. Educators can include role-playing or storytelling exercises to help students practice these skills, fostering empathy and teaching them how to navigate relationships with greater understanding.

In conclusion, *Turning Red* provides valuable lessons on balancing family values with personal identity, making it an excellent resource for education. By discussing themes of generational conflict, self-discovery, and emotional growth, the film offers opportunities for students to reflect on their own lives and develop cultural awareness. Integrating these lessons into teaching practices can help students build the critical and emotional skills needed to develop in a multicultural world.

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