

Symbolism in Film Turning Red: Representation of Chinese Culture Through Animated Movies

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ABSTRACT

Disney and Pixar film has unique stories and visuals that focus on a mother and daughter relationship as they deal with the big changes of their adolescence. Film is a work of art that depicts life in the universe in such a way that those who watch it gain a broad understanding. Turning Red is one of Disney Hotstar's most popular animated films. This film depicts the Buddhist aspects of religion, customs, and daily living with many significant qualities. This study aims to investigate the Chinese symbols represented in the film Turning Red. To support the analysis, the authors used a qualitative methodology to apply the Mise en Scene approach of Manon de Reeper, the Symbolism concept of Charles Sanders Pierce, and the Representation theory of Stuart Hall. The results indicate that the film Turning Red attempts to represent Chinese cultural identity through symbols such as food, architecture, and animals.

Key words: Chinese Film; Cultural Identity; Representation; Symbol

INTRODUCTION

The film is one of the entertainment media with multiple functions. In addition to being a source of amusement, the film contains informative, educational, and persuasive purposes that can be inferred from its symbolism. Given its multiple uses, the film is one of the most effective means of communicating a message since it is widely accepted by the community. (Septiani et al., 2019).

The film's content will evolve if it is rich in meanings or symbols and has context. Films that employ an abundance of symbols, signs, and emblems will challenge the viewer's ability to comprehend the meaning and essence of the film (Septiani et al., 2019). There are several films that raise the symbols in their storylines. One of them is Turning Red.

Turning Red is a 2022 animated comedy film directed by Domee Shi that can be watched on Disney Hotstar. The main character's name is Meilin. She is Chinese, but she lives in Toronto, Canada. The film depicts Meilin "Mei" Lee's hardships as a student with an inherited curse. She was first shown as a teen who excels in

various areas and has everyday contact with her age group, such as being a member of a gang and being a member of an idol group (Saripudin et al., 2023).

The issue began when Mei thought her mother was too overprotective and restrictive, preventing her from correctly expressing her emotions. As a consequence, Mei is cursed. This curse makes her turn into a red panda. Initially, this transformation was a blessing for the women of the Lee family. When all the lads go to battle, they use the red panda transformation to defend their hometown from troops attempting to conquer it. As time passes and the world changes, this gift turns fatal for the Lee family (Saripudin et al., 2023).

Mei's life is significantly altered by the red panda's curse, which causes her to avoid social contact. When Mei's best friend discovers her curse, the storyline of the film takes off. Her ability to manage her emotions and change into a red panda is facilitated by her best friend's affection. During the red moon, the Mei family holds a ceremony to release the curse and eliminate it. Mei and her friends utilize the red panda to make money in order to purchase concert tickets for their favorite boyband. The red panda's transformation becomes a show. Mei's mother discovers her efforts and becomes enraged. Mei finally participates in the ceremony to rid the world of the red panda to placate her mother (Saripudin et al., 2023).

The fictional film *Turning Red* depicts a variety of Chinese cultural elements, including colors, architecture, cuisine, animals, and customs. The authors view that those symbols represent Chinese identity. Thus, the authors are interested in analyzing how the Chinese symbols are portrayed in the film *Turning Red*.

The beginning of the 1980s marked the beginning of symbolism as a movement. According to the 2018 reprint of Robert Goldwater's book *Symbolism*, symbolism represents intellectual idealism instead of positivist, scientific ideas that have infected art and literature. Time has revealed, however, that symbolism is a literary method that employs symbols such as marks, locations, animals, phrases, characters, and abstract concepts to convey a deeper meaning than the literal one (Goldwater, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

To support the analysis, the authors applied *Mise en Scene* approach from Manon de Reeper to see how the movie elements work in the film *Turning Red*. Then, the authors also utilized the Symbolism concept from Charles Sanders Peirce and Representation theory from Stuart Hall.

The first approach applied in this study is *Mise en Scene*. *Mise en Scène* refers to the director's conceptualization of the scene and the film. The author influences the audience's comprehension by selecting what is displayed inside the screen's constraints (Manon de Reeper, 2016). Reeper stated that we must assess who and what is present to evaluate how the movie elements work. We must also consider

makeup, facial expressions, wardrobe, setting, appearance, accessories, noises, and lighting. When evaluating the image, numerous elements may be accounted for. It includes editing, a camera, and lighting equipment. First, editing. The editing technique compresses time and places it into a logical sequence of shots. Second is the camera as one of the essential aspects to consider while analyzing a film. Lighting comes last. Lighting is crucial for establishing the ambience of a movie (Manon de Reeper, 2016). In addition, *Mise en scène* can transmit meaning almost as well as conversation and narrative. It is crucial for media and film studies analysis because it identifies major visual codes and how they may have been utilized by some to generate meaning (Insider, 2020).

The viewpoints of Gail Lathrop and David O. Sutton are also considered. *Mise-en-scene*, a French term that translates to "place on stage," refers to all the visual elements of a theatrical production that occur inside the confines of the stage. Filmmakers have hijacked the word and enlarged its meaning to refer to the director's control over the film's visual elements. *Mise-en-scene* shares four traits with the physical art of the theatre: the setting, costumes, lighting, and movement of figures. First, setting. As a crucial visual element of the film, the setting includes everything the audience sees that conveys time and place, except the costumes. Second, costume. Costume, or clothing and accessories, is an essential visual element in motion pictures. For directors concerned with authenticity (historical realism), the costume is a crucial means of creating authenticity. It takes substantial research into the clothing designs, materials, and colours likely to have been worn during a certain era. Third, figure conduct. Figure expression and movement are key parts of the *Mise-en-scene* used by the director to enrich the narrative and create thematic cohesion in a film, alongside setting and costume. Figure expression refers to an actor's facial expressions and posture, whereas figure movement encompasses all other actions, including gestures. The final, lighting. Lighting is more than the illumination that enables the audience to view the film director's efforts. Lighting, like other elements of *Mise-en-scene*, is a tool employed by the director to convey to the spectator the significance of a character or the plot (Lathrop, G., & Sutton, n.d.).

The second concept utilized in this study is the concept of Symbolism from Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce described three primary components of Semiotics (Figure 1).

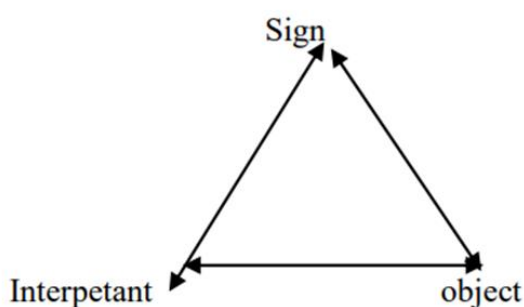


Figure 1. Pierce's Diagram of Semiotics

From above diagram, it could be understood that a sign can be construed as providing information about another subject. Not all signs are symbolic, verbal, or artificial. Then, an object is the subject of both a sign and its interpreter. It can become any imagined or arguable entity, such as an object, event, or relationship. The object is the universe of discourse to which a particular or partial object belongs. Meanwhile, an interpretant is the precise meaning of the sign, a form of thought that the sign's integrity indicates. The interpretant is a symbol of the object and the "antecedent" of the interpretant (Sihombing, L. H., Shinta, D., Remmy, E., & Christian, 2022).

The last theory is the Representation from Stuart Hall. Representation refers to how language produces meaning. Signs, according to Hall, can be utilized to understand language and meaning in representation. They can express the significance of something in a unique and visually beautiful way. Signs often symbolize events, things, and even individuals. The sign can also be a thing or event in and of itself. They can also be used to indicate something that is not real, something that is regarded unreal or fantastic, and something that does not exist in reality. Signs also reduce language so that the intended message can be more precise. Identifying the meaning of thoughts, ideas, or emotions is simple once the signs and symbols that express them have been discovered (Stuart Hall, 1997).

In the representation of theory, Hall also presents the process of observing that people must engage in when seeing, listening, and acting because humans always use the process of thinking to interpret and infer all data. Through acquiring information, humans will develop their notions and understanding of facts and principles through thinking. Items that symbolize the mental and human mind, such as writing, books, paintings, films, natural objects, imagined objects, and other objects, can be used to describe concepts. Meaning can arise as a result of the interaction between objects in the world and humans, events and things, what is real and fictitious, and conceptual frameworks that can serve as mental representations (Sihombing & Sinaga, 2021).

There are several studies that analyzed the film *Turning Red*. One of them is Gina's (2022) research titled "Comparing language style and language function between teenagers and adults in the film *Turning Red*." Her research centered on the language patterns and functions utilized by adolescents and adults in the film *Turning Red*. Using a sociolinguistic approach, the researcher chose the film because it reflects the daily lives of adolescents and adults. The objectives of her study include to determine the sorts of linguistic styles utilized by adolescents and adults in *Turning Red*, determine the language function adolescents and adults use while employing language style, and determine the differences and similarities between the language styles and language functions employed by adolescents and

adults in the film "Turning Red" (Zumaria, 2022). However, the authors' focus is different from her study. In this study, the authors focus on how the symbols in the film Turning Red represented as the Chinese culture.

METHOD

In this study, the authors utilized the Mise en Scene approach of Manon de Reeper, the Symbolism idea of Charles Sanders Pierce, the representation theories of Hall and a few other journals that cited Hall's statement to support the analysis. The authors did several stages to analyze. First, the authors chose scenes demonstrating how the characters behave, dress, and react. The authors could also gain insight from other elements, such as setting and storyline. This idea relates to Manon de Reeper's Mise en Scene method. Second, the authors connected the observation to Charles Sanders Pierce's concept of Symbolism. The authors attempted to link its Symbolism and Stuart Hall's Representation theory. The last, the authors ended the investigation by examining the portrayal of Chinese culture in the film Turning Red.

RESULT AND DISUSSION

This study concentrates on investigations into how the film Turning Red depicts Chinese culture. There is a variety of visual situations and images to investigate cultural representation in China.

The first observation is taken from a scene on minutes 06:39 to 06:46 (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Red colour around the temple

In Figure 2, we can see the setting is in a temple. The temple is decorated with red color. There are red lanterns and red walls. Besides that, we can also see the main character, Mei wears a red cardigan.

Referring to Pierce's concept, the authors see that the object refers to the cloth and temple. As we can see that the cloth that Mei wears is red and the temple is also decorated with red color. Those are the signs that could be interpreted more detail.

In a closer observation, in terms of its symbolic connotations, illustrative usages,

and idiomatic expressions, the color "red," or "hong" in Chinese pin yin, has unique symbols in Chinese. The colour "red" can be comprehended in Chinese culture from various perspectives. It represents joyous happenings. Red is commonly associated with the source of life on Earth, the red sun. This holds in both English and Chinese. The sun provides life, warmth, and vitality to the world. Under these circumstances, Chinese people frequently associate "red" with life, happiness, warmth, good fortune, etc.

In Chinese culture, "red" is frequently associated with compliments, celebrations, and accolades. Typically, the honor roll or board is written on "red" paper and is referred to as the "hong bang-red honour roll." (hong bang is Chinese pin yin, which translates as "honour roll inscribed on red paper" in English (Huang, 2011).

Marriage is another concept that signifies happiness. Red is a symbol of good fortune and joy. For instance, a "hong niangred lady" is a marriage broker or matchmaker. In Chinese marriage custom, the individual who introduces the lovers is known as a "hong niang-red woman." According to folklore, the Chinese God of marriage, a man of the moon, keeps a record of the marriage destinies of all on Earth and binds engaged couples for life with a "hong xian-red thread" (Huang, 2011).

Another perspective is taken from Yanping Ba (2010). He cited it from New Chinese-English Dictionary (2003). "Red color looks like blood: 红枣 (*hong zao*: 'red dates'). The red cloth represents the happiness and celebration: 披红 (*pi hong*: 'wear red sashes or cloth as a sign of honor, festivity, and so on'). To symbolize anything that is successful or goes well: 红运 (*hong yun*: 'good luck'). To symbolize somebody who is the leader's favorite or is well-known by the audience: 走红 (*zou hong*: 'become popular') (Contemporary Modern Chinese Dictionary, 2005, p. 563). To represent great consciousness in revolution and politics: 红色根据地 (*hongse genjvdi*: 'red base'). To indicate bonus and dividend: 红利 (*hong li*: 'bonus'). To refer to a surname: 红云 (*hong yun*: 'Hong, Yun') (The new Chinese – English dictionary, 2003, pp. 567-568).

In this scene, we can also see the temple. Based on the research, the Chinese temple in Yuba County provides some inspiration for "Turning Red." The temple in the animated film is modeled on the Bok Kai Temple in Marysville. The Bok Kai Temple has attracted innumerable worshippers and tourists throughout the years. The Bok Kai Temple is one of the oldest operational temples in Northern California. It was constructed in the 1880s, and it is also one of the few that is still privately owned. Currently, the temple is a California Historical Landmark and a National Register of Historic Places-listed property (Jeremiah Martinez, 2022). Hence, the authors see that the red temple, cloth, lantern are the symbols that represent the Chinese culture.

The second observation is the scene on minutes 06:50 (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Mei Lee's home temple

In Figure 3, we can see Mei's home temple. The most visible characteristic of traditional Chinese architecture is the use of a wooden framework. The camera angle shots on the roof and wall. The authors see that the colored roofs were beautifully designed. The wall and door were carved attractively with red color.

In a closer context, typically, tiles are used on the roofs of Chinese classical buildings. Consider the entire structure's fire protection, waterproofing, and drainage elements. The primary structure of traditional Chinese architecture is composed of wood. Consequently, the primary role of the roof is to provide shelter and frame protection. In addition, the ridge of ancient Chinese architecture is curved rather than linear. Take the hip roof, for example the central ridge is slightly bowed, whereas the side ridges have a distinct curve shape (Li & Liu, 2017). Hence, the authors see that Mei's temple house symbolizes her family identity as Chinese.

The third observation is the scene on minutes 16:35 (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Mei Lee turns into a red panda

In this scene, When Mei Lee wakes up, she turns into a red panda. Sun Yee is responsible for Mei Lee's transformation as he respects Mei Lee's family. Mei Lee's forefathers did this to preserve the family, a trait that would be passed down to every woman in her lineage.

The authors see that red could be classified as a sign, while panda is the object. In this sense, a red panda symbolizes several ideas. Red Panda is proud of its uniqueness. It is camouflaged by its dark brown hair and six rings on its fluffy tail, which blend into a forest background. In addition to being good at camouflage, the Red Panda has a thick covering of fur on its paws that protects its feet from snow and ice in the winter. It has a fake thumb for gripping tree bark and the capacity to swivel its ankles, allowing it to go down a tree headfirst. In light of this, the meanings of the Red Panda include camouflage, stability, and protection. Red Pandas inhabit China's southwest and the Himalayas. It must consume vast quantities of bamboo to survive. A Red Panda consumes approximately eight pounds of shoots and leaves each day. In China, the red Panda signifies good fortune, particularly for newlyweds. Red Panda is supposed to be a master of true sight and concealment. The Red Panda was the official mascot of the Darjeeling Tea Festival in the 1990s (*Red Panda Symbolism & Meaning / Spirit, Totem, & Power Animal*, 2023).

The following analysis is the scene on minutes 09:07 (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The temple is in the middle of the city

In this scene, the camera focuses on the view of the sky which shows the shrine of Mei Lee's house in the heart of Toronto. It demonstrates that the Mei Lee family's Chinese heritage is highly robust and greatly impacts the setting. As seen in the scene above, the shape of a building's roof is characteristic of Chinese culture. Carving and wood construction as structural elements of Chinese structures might be viewed as defining characteristics of Chinese architecture. Constructive features such as roof supports (*tou kung*), the link between columns and beams, and even roof trusses are exquisitely crafted using various forms.

The next observation is taken from the scene on minutes 6:56 to 07:50 (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Mei Lee's mom was praying in her altar

In this scene, we will see a Chinese woman, Mei Lee's mother, praying at her altar, a prayer room. Mei Lee and her mother pray at the altar every day. There are incense and candles present. This relevance is that Mei Lee's mother is of Chinese ancestry and inherited her beliefs. This scene also emphasises incense, suggesting that it is an essential component of prayer. They typically place incense, oil-filled bottles, fruit-shaped delicacies, and gold foil on the altar. Incense is utilised during prayer to the Creator. Additionally, there includes a bottle of oil. Where the Chinese think that oil represents a smooth life and a healthy body, there are fruits with a sweet flavour. Fruit represents freshness, and the sweetness of the future always provides both freshness and goodness comparable to the flavour of the fruit. Finally, there is paper. Here are two documents to be combusted. The papers were referred to as Sium Kim, or gold paper, and Toa Kim, also known as gold paper. The paper represents appreciation and thankfulness. (Sompotan, 2016) in (Sihombing, 2022). The authors interpret that this scene attempts to show that Mei Lee's mother represents a traditional Chinese family who values traditions and beliefs

The next analysis is taken from the scene on minutes 1:02:48 to 1:03:26 (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Mei Lee's family eats together before the ritual

In this scene, we can see Mei Lee's family eating together at a large round table with lots of food around it. In Chinese tradition, they have dining etiquette that must be followed.

In Chinese culture, foods have been utilised as symbols to convey various messages. Dishes for sharing are placed in the centre of the table. Before eating, members must wait until the entire family has been seated. Rice, porridge, and soup have all been requested. Elders are often served first, followed by males, children, and women. Habits vary between regions. There are sections where the full family eats together, where men and women dine separately, and sections where ladies eat after males. Additionally, women are responsible for wiping the table and washing the dishes (Ma, 2015).

Sharing a meal with Chinese individuals is one of the best ways to understand their culture. Due to the social nature of meals organised outside of business hours, they can take considerable time to complete. As is customary in cultures with a Confucian heritage, the oldest person in the company should be the first to sit down and begin eating. The oldest should also be the first to rise when the dinner is over. Wait to be advised where to sit for safety. Traditionally, the Chinese believe that sharing a single bowl or dish strengthens relationships (*Chinese Etiquette*, 2017). Thus, the authors view that this scene attempts to show Chinese culture.

The last observation is taken from the scene 1:08:20 to 1:10:00 (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Mei Lee's meets her ancestor, Sun Yee

This scene focuses on the meeting between Mei Lee and her ancestor, Sun Yee. For Mei Lee, that gathering was meaningful. In this scene, the ancestors attempt to expel and end the curse that transformed Mei Lee into a red panda that was passed down from their predecessors. Mei Lee that should have been able to dismiss the curse from her body chose to become a red panda forever since she recalled the incredible moment when she first transformed into one. When Sun Yee appears from the sky wearing a red robe adorned with intricate ornamentation, Chinese culture is highly prominent in this scene. How Mei Lee bowed to Sun Yee upon meeting him was an act of respect for her ancestor.

From the scene above, we can see that Mei Lee is close to her ancestor, Sun Yee. In this context, Lee which is Mei's surname signifies a Chinese symbol. Based on the history, the name Li or Lee or Lie originated from the royal dynasty of Ying, which descended through the grandson of the legendary Yellow Emperor, Emperor Zhuanxu. After General Gaoyao, a descendant of Zhuanxu was named

Minister of Justice, or Dali, his descendants adopted, meaning "reason," as their surname.

Another legend ties the Li surname's roots to Taoism's creator, Li Er, often known as Lao Tzu or Laozi. Regardless of its origins, the number of people with the name Li soared during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Not only did all twenty emperors have the surname Li, but the monarchs also bestowed the surname as a token of honour upon generals, bureaucrats, and their clans.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the film's plot is both informative and entertaining. One of the issues that could make a film entertaining to watch is history. *Turning Red* is an example. This film aims to introduce cultural symbols, including architecture, food, animals, and traditions. The red temple in Toronto, Canada, is one of the most prominent symbols in this film. This temple is Mei's ancestral home. The lanterns, walls, and doors are ornamented with a crimson colour scheme. The prayer area, known as the Altar, is also a symbol of Chinese tradition. Aside from that, the film depicts the cuisine and dining manners. Sun Yee is the final ancestor who defends Lee's family. The findings indicate that these are the cultural icons of China. Consequently, the authors argue that this film represents Chinese culture.

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