

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Globally, the representation of Chinese culture in media has been predominantly shaped by Western perspectives, often filtered through an Orientalist lens. Early Hollywood films such as *The Good Earth* (1937) and *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) portrayed Chinese characters through stereotyped portrayals, either as passive, submissive figures or as threatening villains (Dong, Sun, & Zhang, 2022). While more recent animated films like *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and *Mulan* (1998) appear to shift this narrative by incorporating elements of Chinese culture, scholars argue that these portrayals still reflect Western frameworks. For example, Michelle Anjirbag in 2018 emphasizes how *Mulan* (1998), although grounded in Chinese folklore, selectively repackages traditional cultural values into narratives that prioritize Western ideals of individualism and self-determination (Anjirbag, 2018). Then, Zhen (2021) similarly critiques *Mulan* for its Westernized portrayal of female autonomy, noting that it diverges from core Confucian values.

Similarly, research on *Kung Fu Panda* highlights how, despite its surface-level inclusion of Chinese aesthetics, the film still operates within Hollywood's dominant American viewpoint, often blending Chinese elements with Western narrative tropes and worldviews. These critiques suggest that even films that appear culturally rich may still perpetuate simplified or distorted representations when seen through a Western-dominant perspective. This suggest that this trend reflects a broader commercial strategy within American filmmaking: the inclusion of Chinese cultural elements is often driven by the desire to appeal to both Western and Asian audiences (Zurbrigg et al., 2023). These critiques suggest that even films that appear culturally rich may still perpetuate simplified or distorted representations when seen through a Western-dominant perspective.

A more recent example of cultural representation in animation is *Turning Red* (2022), which marks a significant shift in how Chinese identity is portrayed on screen. The film centers on a Chinese-Canadian protagonist and explores cultural

identity through a deeply personal and bicultural lens. Directed by Domee Shi, a Chinese-Canadian animator and film director who also contributed to *Inside Out* (2015), directed the Oscar-winning short film *Bao* (2018), and directed *Elio* (2025) *Turning Red* offers a nuanced and authentic depiction of Chinese culture informed by lived experience rather than mere observation.

Unlike earlier portrayals that often focused on historical myths or surface-level traditions, *Turning Red* delves into more intimate themes such as intergenerational conflict, cultural hybridity, emotional suppression, and self-acceptance. It presents Chinese identity as something both inherited and actively shaped through personal growth. The film was both commercially and critically successful, grossing over \$20 million in its opening weekend and earning a 95% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Yet, despite its positive reception, *Turning Red* also sparked discussions about the accuracy of its cultural portrayal and whether its film elements fully capture the depth of Chinese values and traditions (Chen & Liu, 2023).

The significance of these representations extends far beyond entertainment. Media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. For minority groups, cultural representations in films can influence identity, self-perception, and the experience of belonging within society. Whereas for the majority groups, it influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Inaccurate or stereotyped portrayals can reinforce prejudices, meanwhile authentic and diverse representations can foster mutual understanding and tolerance, contributing to social harmony and reducing prejudice (Dembe, 2024). For that reason, *Turning Red* presents a valuable opportunity to analyze how Chinese culture is represented, and whether that representation challenges or reinforces cultural assumptions.

This study applies Stuart Hall's constructionist approach to representation (1997), a key framework in Cultural Studies that emphasizes how meaning is actively constructed rather than simply reflected in media, particularly films. Hall's approach argues that representation is not a direct mirror of reality but a process through which meaning is constructed using signs, symbols, and shared cultural narratives. In this framework, cultural meanings are shaped not only through social

interactions and visual symbolism, but also through historical contexts, rather than being fixed or universally understood (Dembe, 2024).

In *Turning Red*, this process is evident through various film elements, such as visual symbolism, character dynamics, and narrative structure. The red panda, for instance, is not just a literal transformation but serves as a constructed metaphor that can signify generational expectations, emotional suppression, or the negotiation of cultural identity. By employing Hall's constructionist framework, this study examines how *Turning Red* shapes the representation of Chinese culture through film elements, analyzing how these representations either challenge or reinforce dominant cultural narratives.

1.2 Statement of The Problem

1. How does *Turning Red* represent Chinese beliefs through its film elements?
2. How are Chinese family values represented through the interactions among the characters?

1.3 Purpose of The Study

1. To analyze how *Turning Red* represents Chinese beliefs through its film elements.
2. To analyze how the Chinese family values are represented through the interactions among the characters.

1.4 Significance of The Study

This study is significant because it promotes a deeper portrayal of Chinese culture in media. By analyzing *Turning Red* through Stuart Hall's constructionist approach to representation, this study highlights how animated films serve as a medium for cultural representation. It also examines how *Turning Red* represents Chinese family beliefs and values through character interactions, storytelling, and visuals, offering insights for readers into the depiction of Chinese traditional beliefs and values.

1.5 Methodology of The Study

The writer adopts qualitative descriptive approach to examine the representation of Chinese culture in the film *Turning Red* through the lens of Stuart Hall's constructionist approach to representation. A qualitative descriptive approach is suitable for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of Chinese cultural themes, character interactions, and symbolic representations in the film.

This study applies a close reading method, focusing on the film's cinematography, mise-en-scène, color, and other film elements to discover how cultural meanings are constructed. Through Stuart Hall's constructionist approach, the study examines how these elements encode and convey messages about Chinese culture, particularly in relation to tradition, filial piety, and identity. By analyzing how *Turning Red* constructs these representations. In this study, the data will be obtained directly from scenes in the film *Turning Red* which aired through Disney Hotstar platform, focusing on the visual elements, character interactions, and narratives that showcase Chinese family beliefs and values. Other than that, the data will be obtained through an extensive study of literature, including scientific writings in journals, books, and articles from credible sources.

1.6 Scope and Limitation

This study is limited to the analysis of cultural representation in the film *Turning Red*, with a specific focus on Chinese family beliefs and values as portrayed through its film elements. It does not aim to generalize findings to other animated films, cultures, or broader Chinese diasporic experiences beyond what is depicted in this movie. While the scope is limited, this study may serve as a reference point for future research examining similar cultural representations in animated films.

1.7 Status of The Study

Several previous studies have explored related topics and taken as sources in supporting this study. Tanzil and Andriano (2023), in "*Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis in Turning Red Movie*," analyze interpersonal communication between

mother and child in the film through a semiotic approach, highlighting the importance of effective communication in familial relationships. Chen and Liu (2023) in “*A Study on Chinese Audience’s Receptive Behavior towards Chinese and Western Cultural Hybridity Films Based on Grounded Theory—Taking Disney’s Animated Film Turning Red as an Example,*” apply grounded theory to examine key factors influencing audience reception of the *Turning Red* film. It focuses on conflict management, communication, and parenting styles rather than an in-depth exploration of cultural representation.

Salwa and Amen (2023) in “*An Image of Chinese Ethnic Culture in the Film ‘Turning Red,’*” analyzes the depiction of Chinese ethnic culture in *Turning Red*, highlighting the film’s representation of key cultural elements such as religion, relationship, and social structure, while noting a deep focus on the language system. The religious system is also emphasized through scenes at the family shrine, with symbolic items like incense and red candles. The film also explores cultural conflict, drawing from director Domee Shi’s personal experiences to portray the tension between traditional expectations and modern adolescence. In addition, the previous study captures the authenticity of teenage friendships, illustrating both emotional support and the natural process of learning through mistakes.

Furthermore, Sabbila & Nur (2023) utilize the theory of cultural hegemony in “*Cultural Hegemony in The Film Turning Red Through Characterization.*” Their study explores how the film illustrates identity complexities and emotional expression within dominant cultural narratives. Their study is aiming to analyze the impact of cultural hegemony formed in the film.

While these studies examine *Turning Red* and other films through semiotics, audience reception, cultural hegemony, and language system, none have specifically explored how *Turning Red* constructs cultural meaning through its cinematic elements using Stuart Hall’s constructionist approach. This study seeks to fill that gap by using Hall’s constructionist approach to analyze how *Turning Red* represents Chinese culture through its film elements, character interactions, and storytelling.

1.8 Organization of The Study

Chapter I: Background

This chapter provides an overview of the study by introducing the research background, problem formulation, objectives, significance, and scope of the study. It also outlines the theoretical framework and research methodology, explaining the qualitative descriptive approach used to analyze *Turning Red*. Additionally, it describes the data collection and analysis techniques, ensuring a clear understanding of the research process.

Chapter II: Review Of Related Literature

This chapter presents relevant theories and previous studies that support the analysis. It includes a discussion of Stuart Hall's representation theory and its application in media studies, particularly in examining cultural portrayals in film. Additionally, it explores the concept of cultural representation, and key aspects of Chinese culture, such as Chinese symbolism, family values, beliefs, traditions. This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation necessary for analyzing the film's representation of Chinese culture.

Chapter III: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the analysis of *Turning Red* by applying Stuart Hall's representation theory. The findings are categorized into three main themes: (1) how does *Turning Red* represent Chinese culture through its film elements? (2) How are the Chinese family values represented through the interactions among the characters? (3) What messages about Chinese culture are conveyed in *Turning Red*, and how do they contribute to cultural understanding? The discussion explores how these cultural elements are encoded in the film and whether it represents Chinese culture accurately.

Chapter IV: Conclusions and Suggestions

This chapter summarizes the key findings of this study and discusses their implications for future literature studies and educational practices.