

CHAPTER III

REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE CULTURE: FAMILY BELIEFS AND VALUES IN TURNING RED MOVIE

This chapter explores how *Turning Red* represents key aspects of Chinese culture, particularly in the area of family beliefs and values. Through its characters, setting, and narrative choices, the film offers more than just entertainment. It becomes a lens into the traditions, expectations, and emotional dynamics found in many Chinese families. The analysis focuses on how concepts such as generational hierarchy, family honor, collectivism, and emotional restraint are portrayed, and how these cultural values shape the characters' behaviors. By examining these elements, this chapter aims to uncover how the film both reflects and challenges common perceptions of Chinese identity, ultimately offering a more nuanced and empathetic portrayal of a culture often simplified in mainstream media.

3.1 Chinese Beliefs Represented in Turning Red Movie

This section delves into the intricate portrayal of Chinese beliefs within *Turning Red*, examining how the film's visual and symbolic language effectively communicates Chinese cultural values. Beyond a simple narrative of adolescent transformation, the film meticulously integrates elements of Chinese tradition into its story, creating a rich cultural representation. This analysis focuses on key film elements that embody core Chinese beliefs, including scenes of ancestral worship, the ritualistic cleaning of the family temple, and the symbolic deployment of objects.

By analyzing these visual cues, the author aims to demonstrate how *Turning Red* represents certain Chinese cultural practices, and also utilizes them to enhance the film's thematic depth. This section will explore how these elements contribute to the film's overall portrayal of family, tradition, and the delicate balance between honoring the past and navigating the complexities of a multicultural identity. By examining these culturally significant details, we can better understand how the film effectively translates traditional Chinese values for a global audience.

3.1.1 Chinese Belief Through Reverence for The Ancestors

One of the most prominent Chinese beliefs represented in *Turning Red* is reverence for the ancestors, which plays a significant role in the movie's narrative and symbolic structure. In traditional Chinese culture, honoring one's ancestors is deeply rooted in Confucian thought, where filial piety extends beyond care for living family members to respect and rituals for those who have passed away. These set of beliefs and behaviors passed down across generations, to ensure their continued existence. This belief is often manifested through ancestral worship, altars, offerings, and prayers, reflecting the idea that ancestors continue to influence the well-being of the living.



Picture 3. 1 Mei and her mother doing *pai pai* rituals
(*Turning Red*, 07:32)

Picture 3.1 takes place in the family's ancestral temple or a dedicated space for honoring ancestors. In picture 1, Mei and Ming are seen engaging in one of the most prominent traditional Chinese practices, which is the ancestor worship, often associated with *pai pai*. The term *pai pai* literally means “to bow” or “to pray”. This term refers to the ritual of honoring deceased family members who are believed to remain spiritually present within the family. *Pai pai* rituals involve burning incense sticks, and kneeling, saying individual's wishes and prayer, and then kowtow three times. The rituals were typically held in an ancestral hall in the large family house, as it is in picture 3.1. This practice reflects the belief where the bond between generations does not end with death but continues through reverence and ritual. It

represents how ancestral reverence is not only a spiritual duty but also a source of familial continuity.

In picture 3.1, it is implied that Sun Yee, the family's revered ancestor, continues to play a vital role in Mei's family's spiritual and emotional life. Sun Yee's spirit is not only respected but actively relied upon, as the family believes her presence influences their protection, unity, and overall well-being. The red panda spirit, which originates from Sun Yee, symbolizes both a blessing and a burden passed down through generations, reinforcing the idea that ancestors shape not only identity but also the challenges descendants face.

When worshiping, the Chinese burn varying amounts of incense from one piece to nine pieces in one service depending on the beliefs of each individual. The number of incense sticks used carries specific meanings. In picture 1, there are three incense used by Mei and Ming for the rituals. Salwa and Amen (2023) notes that the use of three incense sticks in worship represents a reverence for the core elements of the universe namely earth, sky, and humans. This symbolism reflects the connection between the physical, spiritual, and human realms, highlighting the holistic nature of traditional Chinese beliefs. Earth symbolizes grounding, stability, and the physical realm. Sky symbolizes heaven, divine existence, and the spiritual realm. Then, humans mean acknowledging humanity's place within this spiritual framework and seeking blessings or guidance.

The cinematography of picture 3.1 employs a high angle shot, looking down on the characters from above. The high angle visually places Ming and Mei in a submissive and humble position, indicating their role as honorable descendants, humbling themselves before the ancestors. This perspective also mimics the "viewpoint" of the ancestors, as if the ancestors are looking down on them, reinforcing spiritual hierarchy and the idea of ownership or symbolic influence of the spiritual realm. The scene focuses on posture, with kneeling, eyes closed, and hands clasped, while the incense smoke enhances a ritualistic and sacred moment. It is visually aligning human submission with spiritual reverence.



Picture 3. 2 Mei and Ming are cleaning the temple

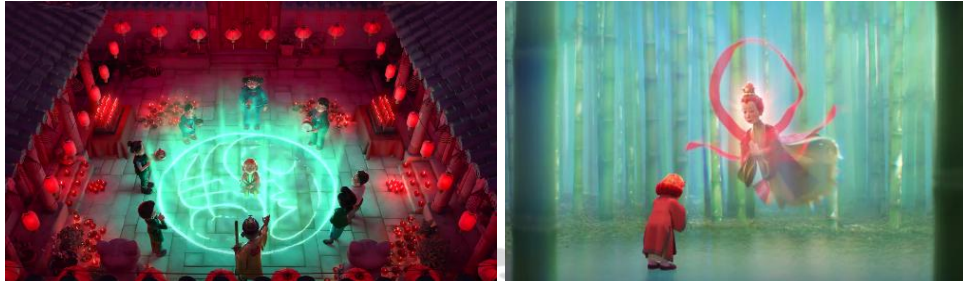
(*Turning Red*, 08:12)

In Chinese culture, cleanliness is often associated with respect, reverence, and spiritual purity. This belief applies to personal hygiene, home environments, and sacred spaces like ancestral temples. According to Cheung (2015), cleaning a family temple is considered a vital act of filial piety, symbolizing care for the ancestors and maintaining harmony within the family. It is more than a chore or physical tidiness. It is a ritual that reflects one's inner sincerity and respect toward those who came before.

In Chinese traditional beliefs, cleaning sacred spaces is also viewed as a way to purify the area from negative energy (*qi*) and restore balance. As Wong (2018) notes, spatial cleanliness is believed to influence spiritual well-being and emotional clarity. This practice becomes especially significant before major family events, seasonal festivals, or when welcoming guests, including ancestral spirits. This signifies the family's readiness to receive the ancestors' presence and blessings during the event. The act of sweeping, dusting, and organizing the altar and temple space is a tactile expression of reverence. It shows that the family not only remembers their ancestors but also honors them through action. Neglecting the temple, on the other hand, is thought to disrupt this connection and bring misfortune or disharmony (Sung, 2000).

The cinematography of picture 3.2 employs the eye-level shot. The camera is placed at eye level in order to create a sense of balance and equality between Mei and her mother, Ming. The centered composition places the audience's focus directly on them and their actions. It emphasizes cooperation and shared

responsibility across generations. As for the costumes, Ming wears a cheongsam-inspired dress, while Mei wears modern clothes. The costumes subtly show generational differences while still depicting them working in harmony.



Picture 3. 3 Mei's family doing ritual & Picture 3. 4 Mei meets the ancestor after the ritual

(*Turning Red*, 1:07:18 – 1:08:20)

The ritual in picture 3.3 is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions, specifically those surrounding ancestry, spiritual practices, and familial hierarchy. The setting is at Mei's family temple, a sacred space often used in Chinese households for ancestral worship and significant ceremonies. The act of performing a transformation ritual within this temple shows a cultural framework where spiritual elements are handled through traditional practices. The participation of elder women, especially Mei's grandmother, symbolizes the matriarchal transmission of wisdom, guidance, and authority (Knight, 2023), which is common in many Chinese family structures. The organized actions of the family visually convey that this moment is not just magical but also sacred. It represents the Chinese cultural understanding that family and tradition hold the key to navigating identity and transformation.

The cinematography of this scene uses a high-angle shot directly above the ritual offers a broad overview of the scene. High-angle shot emphasizes the circular formation of the family around Mei. This shot not only demonstrates Mei's central role but also highlights the collective nature of the ritual. It demonstrates how each family member contributes to the process. The camera angle during this moment reinforces the ritual's solemnity, allowing the viewer to absorb the spiritual and emotional weight of the scene without distraction. The lighting also plays a

significant role: vibrant teal light from the glowing circle on the floor illustrates a spiritual energy, while the red from lanterns and decorations symbolizes festivity. The use of red may also stem from its relation to the color of blood, symbolizing both life and death (Bethe et al., 1991). That represents how the living in Mei's family is still connected to the the ancestors in the spiritual realm.

The mise-en-scène enriches this cultural resonance. The family's attire is ceremonial, creating visual harmony and reinforcing their unified purpose. The glowing circle at the center is a key prop, serving as both a literal and symbolic space for Mei's transformation. Mei, in her human form, stands within it, signifying that she is the central point of the ritual and the one undergoing change. Surrounding her, the family members are arranged in a circle, which is a formation that evokes unity and spiritual focus. Altogether, the ritual scene in picture 3 represents a powerful blend of spiritual transformation, ancestral connection, and communal support. It shows that Mei's red panda spirit is not just a personal challenge but a family legacy.

In picture 3.4, Mei is already in a spiritual realm, where she can meet the ancestor Sun Yee. The setting and composition reflect elements of traditional Chinese ancestral reverence. The scene takes place in a bamboo forest, which is symbolically significant in Chinese culture. Bamboo represents grace and resilience, the qualities that are often associated with elders and ancestors. This natural environment becomes a sacred space, reinforcing the idea that the interaction between Mei and Sun Yee is a moment of spiritual importance to help Mei free from the beast inside her.

From a cinematographic and mise-en-scene perspective, picture 4 intends to show Sun Yee's elevated position in the frame, emphasizing the ancestor's authority and sacred status. Meanwhile Mei, along with her bowed head and clasped hands, is situated lower. Mei's gestures are universal signs of humility, but within this movie, these gestures represents traditional Chinese rituals of honoring elders and ancestors through respectful body language. In this scene, the audience focuses on Sun Yee's face rather than Mei's face, indicating the importance of Sun Yee's presence. Then, the contrast in lighting, with the ancestor glowing softly, centers

the viewer's attention on her and suggests a divine presence. Also, the muted greens and blues of the background allow the vibrant reds in Mei's clothing and the ancestor's flowing ribbons to stand out.

3.1.2 Honoring Chinese Beliefs Through Symbolic Possession

One of the most prominent ways cultural beliefs are represented in *Turning Red* is through the use of visual symbolism within sacred spaces. Symbolic possession refers to how cultural values and spiritual beliefs are embodied in physical objects and settings. These symbols carry meaning that extends beyond their physical form, reflecting deeper traditions about family, identity, and spirituality in Chinese culture. In the movie, symbolic elements are carefully integrated into the mise-en-scène to convey their traditional beliefs. This subsection will examine how these symbolic possessions function within the scene to express key Chinese cultural values.



Picture 3. 5 The ancestor's altar

(*Turning Red*, 07:35)

This picture shows the visual setting of the scene. The room is dimly lit, with a focus on a central altar. The color palette is warm, dominated by reds, contributing to a reverent atmosphere. Red is a prominent color in Chinese culture, often associated with prosperity, honor, and good fortune, therefore, it is a fitting tone for honoring ancestors. The central portrait hanging in the wall is the most important element, as it represents the ancestors being honored. The portrait in the

center shows a female ancestor (Sun Yee) in traditional hanfu attire, seated with composed dignity. This reinforces respect for heritage, especially the matrilineal legacy that is central to the film's narrative. The portrait also serves as a constant reminder of the family's history and the connection between generations.

The props in this picture demonstrates the belief that ancestors continue to influence the lives of their descendants. The presence of candles symbolize guidance for the ancestors' spirits and dispelling darkness. Lighting candles is also an act of reverence and respect, and burning incense is a way to communicate with ancestors, sending prayers and offerings to the spiritual realm (Yadav et al., 2020). Meanwhile the smoke from the burning incense is believed to purify the space and create a sacred atmosphere. The presence these symbolic items placed on the altar represents the belief that honoring one's ancestors maintains harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. These offerings are not merely ritualistic, but they symbolize gratitude, continuity, and the acknowledgment of ancestral influence in daily life. These elements reinforce how Mei's family belief about their ancestors are woven into the family's identity and routines.

The cinematography of picture 3.5 uses a low angle with a centered symmetrical composition. The viewer is positioned slightly below the portrait of the ancestor, looking up at it. The low angle gives the ancestral figure an elevated, authoritative and divine presence. It emphasizes reverence and the spiritual power the ancestors hold over the family. The composition of the props such as candles, incense, carved cats, and fruit, all balanced. It creates a sense of order, tradition, and sacred ritual. Other than that, the color palette, which is dominant reds, deepens the spiritual and intimate mood, reinforcing themes of ancestral honor and symbolic possession.



Picture 3. 6 Sun Yee Hall

(*Turning Red*, 07:50)

Picture 3.6 presents a mise-en-scène that reflects traditional Chinese cultural values, spiritual practices, and symbolic family heritage. The setting is framed around the family's ancestral temple, which serves as a sacred space for revering the maternal ancestor and housing the legacy of the red panda spirit. The elements seen in picture 3.6 plays a symbolic role in reinforcing themes of family tradition and spiritual connection.

The cinematography of the scene, with Mei and Ming centered before the altar, creates a sense of order and spiritual alignment. Their kneeling posture highlights humility and reverence, reflecting the Confucian value of filial piety. The architecture portrays traditional Chinese temples, with red pillars, hanging lanterns, and teal ceramic roof tiles, all commonly found in heritage buildings in Asia. Red dominates the color palette, symbolizing good fortune, tradition, prosperity, and honor. For specific instance, Chinese people believe that lanterns bring good fortune and provide sustenance for their users, as well as repelling reinforcements or evil spirits. The red signboard decorated with a cartoon image of a red panda, slightly softens the formal tone of the setting. This detail reflects how the family's identity merges traditional values with contemporary expression. Other than that, positioned in front of the hall, are two statues believed to be guardian creatures that protect buildings and homes from evil spirits.

Guardian statues in Chinese culture are often depicted as stone lions, commonly known as 'foo dogs' in the West. In this film, however, the guardian creatures are adapted to resemble red pandas. By doing so, the filmmaker subtly

embeds traditional Chinese beliefs with the movie's fictional mythology. The red panda itself becomes a unique choice as mythology in this movie. It symbolizes peace, harmony, calmness, as well as valor and bravery. Red panda has also become a national symbol of China, representing national pride and identity, and is often used in diplomacy to signify goodwill and peaceful relations.

According to previous studies, guardian statues must be arranged in pairs to maintain spiritual harmony, positioned on high platforms to heighten their view of the spiritual realm, and must be placed on either side of the entrance to preserve balance in the space they protect (Nazmiyal, 2021). Picture 3.6 illustrates how *Turning Red* adheres to this custom. Additionally, this scene shows one statue has a calm expression while the other is baring its teeth. In the context of *Turning Red*, it could symbolize duality. It represents peace and protection, control and power, reflecting the dual nature of Mei's red panda spirit. This unique choice represents how Mei's red panda spirit is deeply rooted in her family's legacy.



Picture 3. 7 Lotus and Koi fish

(*Turning Red*, 08:08)

Picture 3.7 presents a peaceful pond filled with lotus flowers and koi fish, set within a tranquil pond. The mise-en-scène carries significant cultural connotations that subtly reinforce the Chinese beliefs embedded in *Turning Red*. From a cultural perspective, the presence of the lotus flower and koi fish is intentional. In Chinese belief, the lotus is a sacred symbol representing purity, spiritual awakening, and resilience (Ravenscroft, 2020). Growing from muddy waters into a beautiful bloom, Lotus mirrors the process of overcoming hardship, a

metaphor for personal growth. This symbolism aligns with Mei's journey as she wrestles with the chaos of adolescence, familial expectations, and her red panda transformation. Similarly, koi fish symbolize perseverance, ambition, and good fortune. This resonates with Mei's narrative arc, as she learns to navigate and embrace the duality of her identity.

The pond looks quiet, in a cultivated space, located near Mei's family temple. It situates the scene within a context of tradition and heritage. The color palette is soft and natural, dominated by greens and blues, punctuated by the vibrant oranges, reds, and whites of the koi fish, and the pinks and whites of lotus blossoms. These tones suggest harmony, while the brighter accents draw visual attention to the symbols, emphasizing their importance.

In picture 3.7, the lotus and koi function as visual anchors for cultural symbolism. Their placement in a quiet pond presents a potential metaphor for introspection, representing Mei's internal conflict and her search for identity. This scene may seem minor, yet its inclusion carries significant weight. It shows the filmmaker intends to embed Chinese cultural values of transformation, perseverance, and inner purity. It subtly reinforces the themes of familial heritage and self-discovery, which are essential to the movie's theme.



Picture 3. 8 Peony at Mei's house

(*Turning Red*, 09:13)

The red peony carries deep symbolic meaning in Chinese culture, traditionally associated with prosperity, honor, beauty, and feminine grace. Often referred to as the "king of flowers" (*mūdān*), the red peony has long been a favored

motif in Chinese art, poetry, and folklore, symbolizing not only material wealth but also the blossoming of female beauty and virtue (Eberhard & Wolfram, 1986) . In *Turning Red*, peony operates as both a cultural symbol and a metaphor for Mei's entry into puberty. This is particularly evident in how her mother, Ming, euphemistically refers to Mei's first period by asking if her "red peony has bloomed." This phrase not only softens the conversation around menstruation but also draws from traditional poetic language that equates flowering with coming of age and sexual maturity.

Beyond dialogue, the visual presence of the peony throughout the film reinforces these layered meanings. Red peonies are subtly embedded in the film. It appears in décor or certain placements, underscoring Mei's evolving identity and the tension between cultural expectations of femininity and her own self-discovery (Yan & Delman, 2011). The recurring visual ties Mei's personal transformation to a larger cultural narrative: the blossoming of a young woman within the framework of familial and ancestral tradition. In this way, *Turning Red* uses peony not only as a symbol of physical change but also as a marker of inherited values and beauty ideals that Mei must negotiate.

Through the symbolic use of food, animals, and ritual items, the film constructs a rich tapestry of Chinese cultural identity. These elements, such as animals, flowers, and ancestral altars that embody reverence, are not just decorative or cultural background. Instead, they carry layered meanings that communicate values, beliefs, and shared heritage. Using Stuart Hall's constructionist approach, these cultural signs are seen as part of a representational system, where meaning is actively created through symbolic codes and practices. The film does not merely depict Chinese culture as it is, but constructs and communicates it through carefully chosen visual and narrative elements. In this way, *Turning Red* becomes a medium where cultural identity is made meaningful to a wider audience through representation.

3.1.3 Preserving Chinese Beliefs through Symbolic Meals

Food in Chinese culture is not merely a matter of sustenance. It functions as a deeply symbolic language through which values, wishes, and ancestral connections are expressed. By showcasing certain dishes and culinary practices, *Turning Red* highlights how food can represent cultural heritage and shared understanding. The foods portrayed in the movie are not limited to traditional Chinese dishes. Even everyday or seemingly ordinary foods such as lettuce, congee, or sunny-side-up eggs, carry meanings rooted in Chinese beliefs. These foods often symbolize vitality, comfort, wholeness, or prosperity through homophonic associations or cultural customs. This section will explore how the movie uses food as a narrative tool to portray intergenerational connections and the transmission of cultural beliefs within Mei's family.



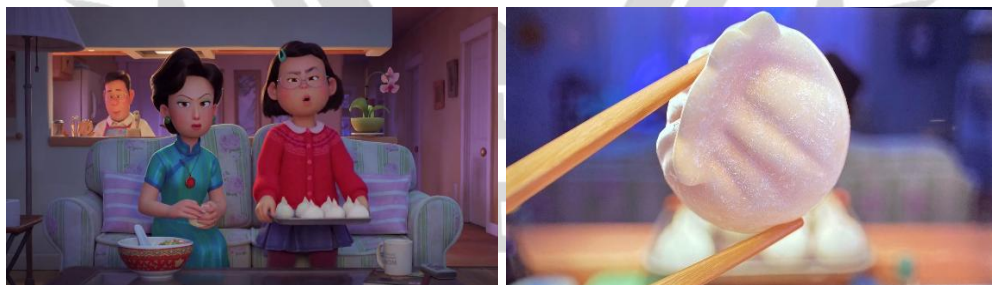
Picture 3. 9 Lettuce & Picture 3. 10 Lettuce and pork belly

(*Turning Red*, 09:30-09:40)

Among the symbolic food depicted in *Turning Red*, the inclusion of vegetables, particularly leafy greens, carries cultural significance rooted in Chinese beliefs. In this cultural context, vegetables are not merely dietary essentials. They function as metaphors for vitality, harmony, and new beginnings. Lettuce, for example, holds special symbolic weight due to its phonetic association with wealth. In both Mandarin and Cantonese, the word for lettuce (*shēngcài*) closely resembles the phrase meaning “rising wealth,” making it a favored ingredient during celebratory meals such as Lunar New Year. This linguistic connection transforms a simple vegetable into a symbol of prosperity and positive transformation.

Furthermore, the green and vibrant nature of leafy vegetables aligns with broader themes of renewal and cyclical rhythm of life. Those are ideas that are deeply valued in Chinese cosmology. They emphasize harmony between nature and human destiny. In this context, the presence of vegetables in the film subtly represents Mei's upcoming journey of emotional and personal renewal.

Similarly, pork holds a revered place in Chinese culinary and cultural traditions. It symbolizes abundance, strength, and a comfortable life, as pork has historically been a marker of prosperity due to its richness and high value. In southern Chinese cuisine, dishes like steamed pork belly are often served during festivals or family gatherings as a way to wish for an fortunate year ahead. The tender slices, often seasoned with a balance of sweet and savory flavors, reflect a deeper cultural ideal of harmony. By including pork belly in the family's meal scenes, *Turning Red* communicates more than dietary preference. It captures a layered tradition in which food becomes an extension of hope and familial love.



Picture 3. 11 Mei and Ming are making dumplings & Picture 3. 12 The dumpling
(*Turning Red*, 10:15-10.31)

Chinese people have prepared a version of dumplings known as *Jiǎozi* for more than 1,800 years (Wheeler, 2016). Dumplings are shaped like ancient Chinese silver ingots, which are boat-shaped, oval, and turned up at the two ends. These dumplings are associated with wealth, celebration, and togetherness, and often served during the Lunar New Year celebrations. The act of preparing dumplings together embodies the hopes for a prosperous and fortunate year ahead (Lin, 2024). Each family may have its unique recipe and method, making the process a personal and familial tradition. Additionally, it reflects the value of filial piety where children stay connected to their parents and elders.

From the lens of cinematography, Picture 3.11 employs a medium shot. It focuses on Mei's and her mother's activity during the dumpling-making while watching television scene highlights the intimacy and significance of this shared cultural practice. By centering on the tactile process rather than dialogue, the film draws attention to how tradition is passed on not just through instruction, but through presence, repetition, and touch. The medium shot allows viewers to witness the direct interaction between mother and daughter, reinforcing the theme of family unity and the continuity of generational knowledge. Then Picture 3.11 uses close up shot to give sole focus on the shape of the dumpling.

The framing of the scene, with Mei and Ming as the central figures and Mei's father positioned quietly in the background, visually communicates the different roles within the family. While the focus remains on the matrilineal transmission of tradition, the father's presence still conveys familial cohesion and mutual support. This subtle composition shows that each family member contributes to the whole, even if their roles differ. Through this moment, the film gently illustrates that Mei is not resisting her heritage but engaging with it in a way that feels both grounding and affirming. It suggests that cultural practices, especially those tied to food and family, are not restrictive obligations but sources of identity, belonging, and connection.



Picture 3. 13 *Congee* with eggs

(*Turning Red*, 16:28)

Picture 3.13 is a breakfast scene features a bowl of porridge (*congee*), a traditional rice dish commonly found in Chinese households. Often regarded as a

comfort food, congee evokes feelings of warmth, safety, and belonging. Its inclusion in the film reinforces Ming's role as a nurturing mother who expresses love and responsibility for her family through small, everyday acts. Ming's preparation of breakfast goes beyond duty; it becomes a quiet yet powerful expression of love. These daily gestures affirm her role as both the emotional and practical caretaker in Mei's life. Furthermore, this scene reflects the broader cultural importance of food in Chinese tradition. They're not merely a sustenance, but a vessel of love, obligation, and continuity.

The meal is topped with sunny-side-up eggs, which carry additional cultural and visual meaning. Eggs are associated with wholeness, renewal, and new beginnings. And those ideas resonate deeply with the changes Mei is undergoing. This breakfast scene specifically takes place on the morning after Mei's first transformation into a red panda. The profound physical and emotional shift Mei undergoes marks a new beginning in her life. In this context, the breakfast also serves as an anchor to familiarity amid chaos. While Mei faces a significant shift, the warmth of her mother's congee represents the steady presence of home and tradition. The eggs on top of the porridge becomes a visual metaphor for transition and growth.

The foods featured in these moments are not always traditional Chinese dishes. The foods include simple meals that carry symbolic meanings in Chinese belief, such as congee symbolizing warmth and belonging, or eggs representing wholeness and new beginnings. This shows that cultural meaning is not limited to only heritage food, but can be reflected through familiar foods as long as they hold shared significance. Ultimately, this simple meal encapsulates the comfort found in cultural rituals while subtly foreshadowing the disruption of identity that Mei will wrestle with throughout the film. In doing so, the scene emphasizes the tension between familial stability and the unpredictable nature of adolescence. Particularly, within the framework of cultural expectation. These choices of meals emphasize that in Chinese families, cooking and eating are ways of enacting care and transmitting cultural memory.

3.2 Chinese Family Values

Chinese family values serve as a foundational layer in *Turning Red*. They shape the characters' behaviors, relationships, and internal conflicts. These values, such as generational hierarchies and filial piety, prioritization of family honor, and the value of familial togetherness, are deeply rooted in Confucian principles. These values continue to influence many Chinese families today, including those in diasporic communities, like Mei's family.

Turning Red portrays how these values are passed down through generations and how they impact the way Mei navigates her identity, choices, and relationships. Through visual storytelling and character interactions, *Turning Red* presents a nuanced portrayal of how traditional family values can both nurture and constrain. It also highlights the tension between cultural heritage and personal growth. This section will explore key Chinese family values depicted in the film and their role in shaping Mei's journey.

3.2.1 Navigating Generational Hierarchies

This section will explore the concept of generational hierarchy, a foundational value in Chinese culture that profoundly shapes family dynamics and individual identity. Central to this hierarchy is the principle of filial piety (*xiào*), which emphasizes deep respect, obedience, and care toward one's parents and ancestors. As scholar Charlotte Ikels (2004) notes, filial piety is not only a moral standard for behavior within the family, but also a structural principle that reinforces Chinese social organization. Within this framework, elders occupy authoritative roles while younger generations are expected to comply to their guidance, creating a vertical structure of influence and obligation.

In *Turning Red*, this generational hierarchy is represented through the interactions between Mei's family member, revealing both the emotional weight of these expectations and the tension that arises when individual desires clash with inherited responsibilities. This section will examine how the film represents generational hierarchies, how they shape Mei's sense of self and familial duty, and how these structures are preserved, negotiated, or challenged, particularly in the

context of a Chinese-Canadian diaspora family navigating changing cultural landscapes.



Picture 3. 14 Ming shows fear to the her mother

(*Turning Red*, 49:52)

This scene illustrates both generational hierarchies and filial piety, which refer to the virtue of respecting elders and ancestors. These values encompass obedience, care, and reverence. It is not merely an action but a deeply held belief system that governs family dynamics and personal conduct within traditional Chinese households. Mei's mother bowing her head toward her own mother (Mei's grandmother) is a visual representation of respect for elders. Bowing is a gesture of submission to elder authority and recognition of their wisdom and life experience.

This moment portrays the hierarchical nature of the traditional Chinese family structure. The grandmother, as the most senior figure, holds a position of authority, while Ming, despite being an adult, is still expected to show submission and respect. Aside from that, Mei's confused expression suggests a potential contrast in understanding or adherence to these traditional values. As a younger member of the family, and one who is also navigating a different cultural context (being a Chinese-Canadian), she may not fully understand the depth of this gesture or its significance.

Beyond duty and hierarchy, this act of reverence may also reflect genuine affection and gratitude. The mother's respectful gesture could stem not only from cultural obligation but also from a heartfelt appreciation for the guidance and care her own mother has provided. This layering of meaning then combines duty with

love, adds emotional depth to the scene and reinforces the richness of filial piety as both a cultural and personal expression. Moreover, the scene portrays how cultural values are passed down through generations. As Mei watches her mother demonstrate such reverence, she will too begin to absorb the significance of respecting elders and upholding family traditions.

Through this visual cue, the scene does not just portray Chinese culture passively, but actively constructs a narrative that communicates the importance of filial piety to the audience. Mei's observation of her mother's gesture becomes a moment of cultural transmission, where traditions are not only acted out but symbolically represented and interpreted. Thus, Hall's theory helps the audience understand how *Turning Red* encodes these values visually, allowing viewers, especially those outside the culture, to decode and grasp the meanings behind the gesture.



Picture 3. 15 Grandmother with Mei's dad

Grandma: Jin, help clear the table!
Jin quickly nods his head.

(Turning Red, 01:03:31)

Picture 3.15 demonstrates a vivid portrayal of generational hierarchy within the family. Mei's grandmother, as the eldest present, naturally holds a position of respect and influence. When she gives instructions to Mei's father, he responds with compliance, reflecting the deference traditionally expected toward older family members. This moment also illustrates a familiar "chain of command" found in many traditional Chinese households, where guidance and decisions typically come

from the top (elders) down to the younger generations. The grandmother's word is treated as final, reinforcing the hierarchical family structure.

At the heart of this interaction is the cultural value of maintaining harmony. In Chinese tradition, respecting and upholding generational roles is seen as essential for preserving peace and unity within the family. Mei's father contributes to this sense of balance by quietly and respectfully following his mother-in-law's lead. Additionally, this moment can be read as a subtle expression of filial piety—a foundational concept in Chinese culture that emphasizes loyalty, respect, and duty toward one's parents and elders. Through his quiet obedience, Mei's father upholds this principle, modeling how deeply rooted these values are in family dynamics.

3.2.2 Upholding Family Honor

This section will be discussing about the second themes in *Turning Red* film, namely the family honor. Family honor is the second significant value within the context of Chinese culture. In many Chinese households, children are raised with a strong sense of duty to fulfill their parents' hopes and uphold the family's honor. These expectations are not merely personal but are often tied to cultural traditions, generational obligations, and the collective reputation of the family.

As previously discussed, generational hierarchies play a crucial role in reinforcing these values. Elders hold authoritative positions, and younger members are expected to show respect and obedience. Within this structure, family honor becomes a multigenerational responsibility. It becomes a value passed down and upheld through a sense of duty, reverence, and the desire not to bring shame to the family. In *Turning Red*, Mei's struggle is not just about navigating adolescence and identity. It is also about aligning her individual desires with the expectations placed upon her as a daughter in a traditional Chinese household. This section will explore how *Turning Red* movie represents the family honor through Mei's relationship with her family, the internal conflict it creates for Mei, and how it reflects broader Chinese cultural values surrounding family structure.



Picture 3. 16 Mei shows her good grades to Ming

Ming: How was school today?

Mei: Killed it per usual. Check it out.

Ming: Oh, that's my little scholar. Today, honor student, tomorrow, UN secretary general. The ancestors would be so proud.

(Turning Red, 07.20-07.25)

The interaction between Ming and Mei in this scene implies the weight placed on academic success within the family. When Mei says, “*Killed it per usual*,” and Ming enthusiastically replies, “*Oh, that's my little scholar. Today, honor student, tomorrow, UN Secretary General*,” it becomes clear that high academic achievement is not only celebrated, but expected. Mei’s instinct to show only her good scores reflects her deep desire to maintain her mother’s acceptance, and Ming’s strong reaction to her academic success reinforces a cycle where validation is tied to achievement. This pattern creates an internal tension for Mei, because her selective sharing indicates an underlying fear that her mother’s acceptance may be conditional.

This dynamic represents a common belief in some Asian households, that a child’s worth is closely tied to academic performance and external achievements. This dynamic is mentioned by Domee Shi in the documentary *Embrace the Panda: Making Turning Red* (2022), where she explains that many Asian children “grow up with the pressure to be perfect” and to bring honor to their families through their achievements. Scholars such as Chao (1994) also note that Chinese parenting often emphasizes “training” and high expectations, particularly in the areas of academic success and discipline, which can lead children to associate love with achievement.

Mei's behavior, therefore, reflects both the cultural value of family honor and the emotional cost of conditional validation.



Picture 3. 17 Mei's poor hidden grades

(*Turning Red*, 56:28)

The scene above shows the grades hidden by Mei under her bed. Beyond just avoiding potential scolding, Mei's concealment of her poor grades points to a pattern of concealment that goes beyond a simple desire to avoid disappointment. She is beginning to present a curated version of herself, crafting an image that aligns with what she believes her mother expects, rather than revealing her authentic self. This act of hiding information, however small, can be seen as the beginning of a habit that could lead to a broken sense of self.

The importance of education in Chinese families has deep historical roots, especially starting from the Ming dynasty. During this time, the civil service examination system became a major way for people to improve their social status through hard work and academic success, instead of relying on family background (Gu & Li, 2023). This shift led families to place great value on education and learning, as it became a way to bring pride and honor to the family. These values are still present today and can be seen in *Turning Red*. In many Chinese families, a child's success or failure is not seen as an individual matter, but as something that reflects on the entire family's reputation.

In this context, Mei's good grades are not simply her personal accomplishments. They serve to uphold her family's honor and maintain their social

image. This reinforces the intergenerational expectation that a child's achievements validate the family's worth. As a result, Mei believes that receiving poor grades would not just reflect poorly on her, but would bring shame to her whole family. This belief adds extra pressure for her to appear perfect and to hide her weaknesses or mistakes. Moreover, it highlights how long-standing cultural traditions, especially those connected to education, success, and honor, continue to influence how young people (Gu & Li, 2023) like Mei are raised and how they navigate their responsibilities within the family.



Picture 3. 18 Ming found Mei's hidden sketchbook

Ming: Mei Mei, what is this?

Mei: It's nothing. Just a boy. He's no one.

Ming: A boy?! Who is he? Did he do these things to you?

(Turning Red, 12:37-12:43)

In this picture, Mei frantically tried to hide her sketchbook under the bed, only to have her mother discover it moments later. That book is filled with her imaginations and drawings of a boy. This action reflects her effort in hiding aspects of her personal life, such as her growing interest in boys, from parental inspection. This moment represents more than a typical act of teenage secrecy, but it highlights the deeper internal conflict Mei faces. As director Domee Shi explains in the behind the scenes documentary *Embrace the Panda* (2022), Mei is torn between being her mother's little daughter and embracing the "beast" in her. The "beast" serves as a metaphor for Mei's emerging individuality: her desires, emotions, and sense of self, and that begins to challenge the expectations of her traditional upbringing.

The scene in picture 3.18 mirrors findings in research on Chinese-Canadian families, where intergenerational conflict often stems from differing cultural norms and expectations. First-generation parents, like Ming, tend to practice authoritative parenting styles rooted in traditional values such as filial piety, academic excellence, and emotional discipline. Meanwhile, the children grow up influenced by Western ideals that celebrate independence, emotional expression, and self-exploration (Ramadhani & Wardoyo, 2025). For Mei, her fear is not just about getting in trouble. It is about the potential of disappointing her family and bringing shame upon them.

In cultures where family honor is significant, a child's personal actions can be seen as reflections of the entire family. As Domee Shi elaborates in *Embrace the Panda* (2022), children of Asian immigrant families often navigate a dual existence: "We have these obligations to carry on the family legacy, and at the same time, we are trying to figure out who we are." Mei's behavior strongly illustrates this emotional tug-of-war. Her attempts to explore her identity and assert autonomy are in constant negotiation with the deep-rooted responsibility to uphold her family's cultural heritage.



Picture 3. 19 Ming fears getting a call from her mother

Ming: Hello, Mother.

Grandma: Ming, I know about Mei-Mei

Ming: I was just about to call you, but everything's fine. I'm gonna handle the ritual on my own.

Grandma: The way you handle Mei-Mei being on the news?

(Turning Red, 39:33-39:50)

In picture 3.19, Ming shows visible fear upon receiving a phone call from her mother regarding Mei's public transformation into a red panda. This scene highlights the significance of upholding family honor. As discussed in the previous section, elder members, especially grandparents, hold significant authority in the Chinese family, often shaping key decisions and judgments. Ming's mother, as the family matriarch, symbolizes this seniority and influence. Ming's anxious expression and defensive tone reflect her internalized deference to that power. Moreover, Gu & Li (2023) argue that the traditional value of filial piety often places a greater burden of caregiving and responsibility on women, particularly daughters and mothers. In this context, Ming's fear is not merely about facing an argument, but about being judged by someone who occupies a higher, respected place in the family structure..

Furthermore, Ming likely fears that her mother will interpret Mei's behavior as a sign of failure in her parenting. This fear is intensified by the importance of *miànzi* (face), which shapes social interactions and familial expectations. Because the red panda transformation happened in public, it could be seen as shameful or disruptive, drawing unwanted attention to the family. Ming's nervous reaction suggests that she is not only concerned for Mei's well-being, but also deeply worried about how this event might reflect on the family's name. As Mei's mother, she bears the emotional weight of maintaining the family's reputation. In a culture where composure, discipline, and family image are highly valued, any behavior that breaks these expectations might be viewed as dishonorable. Ming's anxiety shows how parental identity, especially for mothers, is often judged based on how well their children uphold family values and fit into traditional roles.

This moment also reflects what Chen & Liu (2023) describe as a deeply rooted feature of East Asian family relationships: a parenting style that is marked by intense care, high expectations, and emotional control. They note that many viewers, especially East Asians, could relate to the feeling of needing to apologize for not meeting their mother's expectations. Ming's fear, then, is shaped by more than just a cultural sense of duty. It is also tied to an emotional dynamic where love is shown through control and expectation. This "heavy love," as Chen & Liu call it, pushes the child to grow according to the parent's vision, but often at the cost of the

child's sense of self. Ming's fear of her mother's judgment captures this tension clearly. It reveals the pressure she herself has experienced in the past.



Picture 3. 20 Ming in red panda form

Mei: All I wanted was to go to a concert

Ming: I never went to concerts! I put my family first. I tried to be a good daughter!

Mei: Well, sorry I'm not perfect. Sorry I'm not good enough!

(Turning Red, 1:18:04)

This emotionally charged scene between Mei and Ming vividly shows the weight of family honor within traditional Chinese parenting, especially through the lens of Confucian values. Ming's eruption into her red panda form symbolizes not only her intense emotional repression but also the generational burden she has carried. Her dialogue, "*I never went to concerts! I put my family first. I tried to be a good daughter!*" reflects the Confucian ideal of filial piety. It becomes clear that Ming's strictness is not rooted in malice but in a deeply internalized belief system passed down through generations. It is where personal desires are willingly sacrificed for the collective good. Under this framework, a child's behavior is perceived not as their own, but as a direct reflection of the family's image.

As a result, Mei's seemingly innocent desire to attend a boy band concert is perceived as more than a teenage whim. To Ming, it represents a threat to the family's integrity and a potential failure of her own role as a mother to uphold their values and reputation. Mei's defiant response: "*Sorry I'm not perfect. Sorry I'm not good enough!*" highlight this longheld cycle of obligation and restraint. Her words

cut through the image of the obedient, high-achieving daughter, exposing the emotional toll of constantly trying to uphold her mother's ideal of perfection. This moment challenges the Confucian assumption that obedience and emotional suppression preserve harmony. Instead, Mei's refusal to conform shifts harmony as something that must include mutual understanding and emotional authenticity. The clash is not just between mother and daughter but between two models of honoring the family: one rooted in duty and image, the other in honest connection and emotional truth.

As discussed in the previous illustrations, Mei's life is structured around familial obligations: assisting with temple rituals, excelling in academics, and maintaining emotional restraint. These aspects reflect traditional Confucian values such as filial piety, respect for elders, and *li*, which refers to ritual propriety and the fulfillment of social roles. Mei's mother, Ming, embodies these ideals through her high expectations and fierce protectiveness. Ming is the archetypal Confucian parent: emotionally invested in her daughter's success and reputation, often at the expense of Mei's autonomy. However, this depiction is not meant to portray Chinese families as oppressive or cold. Instead, it represents a nuanced portrait of generational love expressed through structure, sacrifice, and legacy.

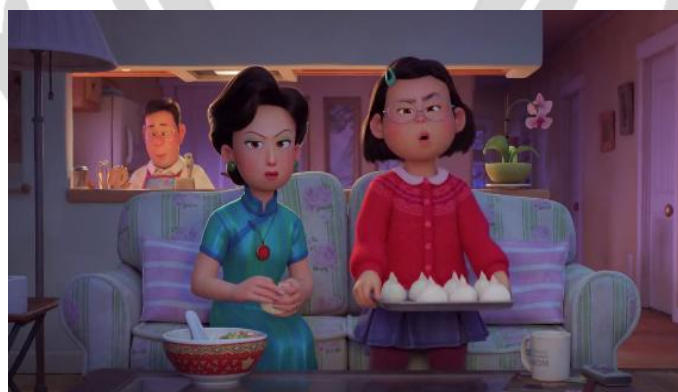
3.2.3 Valuing Togetherness through Shared Meals and Rituals

One of the most deeply embedded values in Chinese culture that is also a key theme in *Turning Red*, is the familial togetherness. The emphasis on familial togetherness in this film represents the collectivist foundation of Chinese culture, which prioritizes group harmony, shared responsibility, and mutuality over individual desires. Chinese collectivism also places importance on *guanxi*, a term referring to relational bonds and networks of trust (Hwang, 1987). *Guanxi* emphasizes mutual care, loyalty, and a sense of obligation within the family. It reinforces the idea that one's identity is shaped through connection rather than separation.

Within this framework, the family is not viewed as a collection of individuals, but as an interconnected whole, where the actions and well-being of each member

profoundly affect the family. Togetherness in Chinese families often manifests through shared practices such as communal meals, family gatherings, and intergenerational rituals, including those tied to ancestral reverence and cultural transmission. In *Turning Red*, these moments are not merely background details. They serve as visual representations of longstanding cultural practices, and a value where the family unit is central to one's identity.

By portraying shared meals and rituals, *Turning Red* illustrates how collectivist values are lived and preserved within the Chinese household. These scenes demonstrate that such values are not merely imparted through formal teaching, but are embodied in the everyday acts of togetherness. This film not only represents the beauty of familial closeness, but also invites reflection on how these cultural values endure and adapt across generations. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that cultural identity is not passively inherited, but actively sustained through ordinary yet meaningful practices within the family.



Picture 3. 21 Ming and Mei is making dumpling

Ming: He shouldve listened to his mother and married Ling-Yi.

Mei: Totally. Siu-Jyu is so two-faced.

Ming: She's just using him to get to the throne.

(Turning Red, 10:00-10.11)

In picture 3.21, the ordinary interaction between Mei and her mother highlights the cultural value of shared family traditions. For many Chinese families, making dumplings is more than just preparing food, it is a communal ritual that brings generations together (Wheele, 2016). Because is time-consuming process, it

becomes a shared effort, with family members gathering to stuff and fold each piece by hand. As it is shown in the scene, the dumpling-making activity becomes a bonding activity. Therefore, this act of collaboration reflects not only efficiency but also connection.

Additionally, in some family's tradition, a coin or string is hidden in one of the dumplings. Whoever finds it is believed to receive extra good fortune, which is a tradition that blends playfulness with symbolism. In this scene, Mei learns more than just how to fold dumplings; she is learning how to participate in a generational rhythm. An unspoken language of love and heritage. Her mother's guidance and presence embody how emotional bonds in Asian families are often communicated through action rather than direct affection.

Other than that, Mei's father is seen cooking in the background, not at the center of the scene. However, the father is still playing a vital role in the atmosphere of quiet togetherness. Mei's understated presence reinforces the idea of familial harmony, where each member contributes in their own way to the shared experience of home. The moment is calm, ordinary, and yet deeply meaningful. It shows that cultural values are often passed down not through dramatic lessons or spoken declarations, but through the consistent rhythm of everyday life such as working side by side, sharing food, and being present. Through this simple and comforting moment, Mei is not portrayed as rebelling against her heritage, but as fully immersed in it. Surrounded by tradition, care, and belonging, she finds grounding in the very culture she is beginning to navigate in her own way.

Turning Red portrays Chinese tradition as dynamic rather than rigid set of rules. While Ming first insists on keeping the traditions and norms passed down from her own upbringing, the film gradually reveals the emotional complexities underlying these demands. Rather than exoticizing Chinese spiritual beliefs or depicting them as mystical or outdated, the narrative integrates them into the emotional and familial lives of the characters, making them feel intimate and relevant.



Picture 3. 22 Mei's family lunch

Mei: I'm heading out to mathletes, see you later!

Ming: Wait, what about dinner? I made all your favorites.

Mei: Thanks, uh... but, Miriam's dad is ordering pizza. Safe me leftovers?

(Turning Red, 48:26-48:36)

The scene above showed how in Mei's family, eating together is valued more than just a daily routine. It is a deeply rooted Chinese cultural practice that functions as both a social and symbolic ritual. Shared meals are a primary way to strengthen familial *guanxi*. In the lunch scene (Picture 3.22), Mei's mother invites her to join a meal with her father, subtly reflecting an unspoken gesture of affection and unity. In this context, the act of offering food also serves as a form of emotional expression, reinforcing that love and support are often shown through actions rather than words. Thus, this scene carries cultural significance, encapsulating values of unity and closeness within the family.

The use of a round table is particularly meaningful. This is why the round table appears more than once in the shared meal scenes, signifying its symbolic importance. In Chinese tradition, the circular shape represents completeness, equality, and harmony (*hé*), a key Confucian ideal embedded in family life. Everyone seated around a round table shares equal access to the dishes placed at the center, which fosters an atmosphere of inclusion and communal belonging. This arrangement reflects the collectivist orientation of Chinese society, where the family is considered the fundamental unit of social structure. Meals, therefore, are more than just opportunities to eat. They become intentional moments of strengthening family ties.



Picture 3. 23 Mei's family dinner

Grandma: Long ago, the spirits blessed the women of our family with a great challenge. Mei-mei, tonight is your turn. Like all the women around this table, you, too, will banish the beast within, and finally become your true self. May Sun Yee guide you and keep you safe.

(Turning Red, 01:02:50)

By gathering around a circular table for two times in the film, Mei's family reflects these ideals. They are not just sharing food but actively creating an environment that feels stable, cohesive, and spiritually aligned. This visual arrangement reinforces the concept of interconnectedness across generations. Furthermore, the meal itself becomes a form of ritual; a moment of emotional preparation, bonding, and quiet affirmation before the rituals of Mei's red panda transmission. In this way, the shared meal functions as both a cultural and narrative device that symbolizes continuity and the intergenerational passing down of tradition. This dinner represents how heritage is not only preserved through formal rituals but also through everyday acts of togetherness.

In addition, the central presence of Mei's grandmother and the women from her maternal lineage further underscores the theme of continuity and lineage. This is particularly significant in relation to the red panda inheritance, which is passed down through the female line. The scene reflects a unique matrilineal tradition within Mei's family. *Turning Red* uses this element to highlight the often-unacknowledged cultural influence of women within certain familial structures, portraying them as the custodians of ancestral knowledge and ritual practice. Mei's father is also present in the scene, though his role is more supportive. His quiet

inclusion suggests that while the ritual centers on the maternal line, male family members are still respected and valued. This balance reflects the film's nuanced portrayal of family that honors tradition while also making space for complexity.



Picture 3. 24 & Picture 3. 25 Mei's family doing rituals
(*Turning Red*, 1:07:18 & 1:17:40)

These scenes show Mei's maternal relatives and her father gathered for her panda transmission ritual, offers a strong visual example of familial togetherness, an important value in Chinese culture. The family's involvement in meaningful ceremony shows that family connection is not only emotional, as previously discussed, but also symbolic and ritual-based. Although Mei is the one going through the transformation, the moment becomes a shared family experience. Each person's presence shows their support and shared responsibility in continuing the family's traditions and helping Mei through this important life change.

The scene includes different generations of Mei's family, from her grandmother and aunts to her father, working together in the ritual. This reflects the idea of intergenerational unity where older family members pass down cultural knowledge and take active roles in guiding the younger generation (Gu & Li, 2023). The ritual becomes a group effort where family comes together to offer support, whether by helping with the ritual or simply by being there. Their support reflects the idea that strength comes from being united and supporting one another through important moments in life.

Additionally, while the ritual is based on old customs, the modern setting shown in the scene, which takes place in a large stadium, shows how cultural traditions can continue even as the environment changes. This suggests that Chinese

families in a new country or culture still find ways to keep their values alive, adapting their practices to fit their present lives while honoring their past. Furthermore, the film is implying simplicity, not only in modest living, but also in emotional expression, as part of a larger theme of finding balance in life. Mei's family lives humbly behind their ancestral temple, dresses modestly, and practices quiet, community-centered rituals. These depictions reflect a lifestyle rooted in humility and cultural continuity, directly challenging common stereotypes that portray Chinese communities as materialistic or overly focused on wealth. Instead, *Turning Red* celebrates simplicity as a virtue and a grounding force in family life.

Emotionally, simplicity is also expressed in the way affection and disappointment are conveyed often quietly, through actions rather than words. Among older generations, emotional reserve is not a lack of love, but a form of self-restraint intended to preserve harmony. Love is shown through acts of sacrifice, responsibility, and silent support rather than direct emotional expression. In this way, *Turning Red* portrays emotional simplicity not as repression, but as a culturally rooted survival tool.

3.2.4 Preserving Self-control

In the *Turning Red*'s historical context, Sun Yee initially requested to be transformed into a red panda as a protective measure for her family during a time of crisis. Specifically, when her husband went off to war and she had to take care of her children. In that original setting, the red panda was not viewed as a curse, but rather as a sacred gift. The red panda symbolized a powerful act of maternal love, strength, and protection. Consequently, every woman in Mei's maternal lineage turns into a red panda when they reach a certain age.

The red panda transformation then stood as a representation of female courage and the essential role of women in defending and nurturing the family. It also reflected a spiritual inheritance passed down through generations. It highlights values such as family responsibility and emotional resilience. Sun Yee's red panda form became a meaningful legacy, rooted in care, generational connection, and the influence of female as the caregiver within the family.

However, as time passed and society changed, the meaning of this power began to shift. Traditional Confucian values, especially the concept of filial piety, which teaches children to show deep respect and obedience toward their parents, have been challenged by modernization, globalization, and urbanization (Gu & Li, 2023). In Mei's modern family, the red panda transformation is no longer seen as a blessing. Instead, it becomes something that must be managed, hidden, and sealed away. Consequently, the family's response reflects a fear of being different in a world that increasingly favors control, social order, and conformity. Powers that were once honored as protective are now viewed as unpredictable or disruptive. This change represents how cultural beliefs can lose their original meaning as families adapt to new environments and modern values.



Picture 3. 26 Mei turned into a red panda when she is happy
(*Turning Red*, 19:30)

In *Turning Red*, the red panda serves as more than just a magical narrative device. It becomes a profound symbol representing the layered experience of Chinese identity, particularly for adolescents navigating intergenerational expectations. Deeply rooted in Mei's family lineage, the red panda is introduced as a matrilineal inheritance the red panda becomes a metaphor for puberty, emotional expression, and personal development. Mei's transformation is marked by mood swings, strong feelings, and visible differences. All of which conflict with the obedient and well-behaved image her family expects her to maintain. These traits are common during adolescence, but they are often seen as inappropriate or embarrassing, particularly for teens in conservative environments.

What makes Mei's experience especially meaningful is that her transformation is not triggered solely by anger or frustration, but often by moments of joy and excitement. When she feels truly alive, as in giggling with friends, dancing in her room, or fantasizing about her favorite boy band, her body responds in a way that cannot be hidden or silenced. This suggests that even joy, when expressed too loudly or freely, can be viewed as disruptive. It highlights how, for some young people, especially girls, expressing positive emotions too intensely can feel just as risky as expressing negative ones.

This tension reveals that in controlled environments, unfiltered happiness can be just as "unacceptable" as open frustration. The symbolism is deepened by the color red. In Chinese culture represents vitality, celebration, and good fortune, but also chaos, intensity, and transformation. Therefore, Mei's panda is not just a culturally magical creature, it is a mirror of her inner world (Chen & Liu, 2023). It represents her joy, excitement, and desire for freedom, all of which challenge the family's expectations of calmness, composure, and emotional restraint.

As time goes by, what was once seen an empowering symbol of family love and female strength is now treated as something dangerous or shameful. In *Turning Red*, the red panda also comes to represent qualities that are often discouraged in modern society: intense emotions, unpredictability, and the courage to stand out. For generations, Mei's family has chosen to suppress this power. Sealing it away in an effort to appear more normal, controlled, and socially acceptable. This shift in attitude illustrates a deeper cultural transformation, showing how traditional beliefs and values are reshaped under the pressure of modern life. The red panda becomes symbolic not only of Mei's cultural heritage but also of deeply personal traits, especially emotional honesty and individuality, that both her family and society often struggle to fully embrace.



Picture 3. 27 Angry Mei in red panda form

Mei: It's a curse!

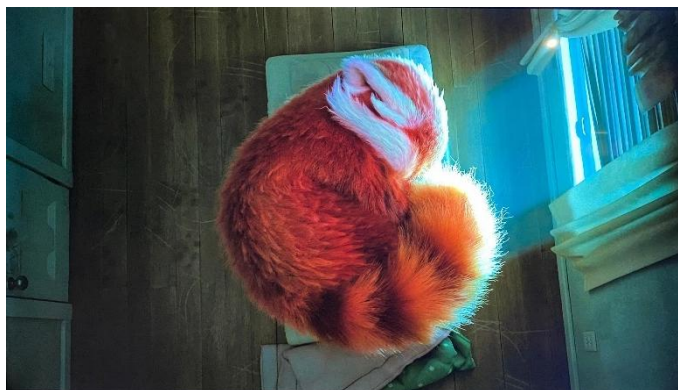
Ming: She meant it as a blessing!

Mei: You cursed us! It's all your fault!

(Turning Red, 28:26-28.37)

The red panda symbolism is also vivid in the scenes where Mei is overwhelmed by intense emotions. In the picture above, Mei shows anger and frustration during a conflict with her mother. The red panda erupts as a physical expression of her emotional build-up. These are not simply outbursts. They reflect how Mei's body responds to the emotional weight she carries, such as the constant pressure to obey, to perform well, and to suppress anything seen as messy or disruptive.

The cultural significance of the red panda in this scene draws on broader Chinese folklore, where animals are often tied to moral lessons, spiritual ancestry, and identity passed down from mother to daughter. The red panda initially appears as a symbol of love, protection, and family honor. However, it also carries the implicit expectation that daughters must behave with composure, modesty, and discipline. It is often seen as extensions of the family's honor or reputation. The ritual of sealing the panda is not simply about eliminating chaos; it reflects a social norm of suppressing individual impulses to preserve collective harmony. This tension between honoring family and expressing oneself lies at the heart of Mei's internal conflict, showing the lived experiences of many Chinese adolescents, particularly those growing up in diaspora family.



Picture 3. 28 Sad Mei in red panda form

(*Turning Red*, 31:09)

Similarly, the scene above shows Mei is curled up in bed, in her red panda form, and here, she is crying. That scene offers a tender and vulnerable portrayal of grief and emotional overload. Mei's transformation in this moment shows that sadness is not something she can simply hide, but it also takes over her entire body. In both this and earlier scenes, the red panda becomes a visual metaphor for emotional suppression. It represents how suppressed feelings, whether quiet or explosive, unavoidably rise to the surface. This act of suppression reflects Confucian ideals of self-restraint and harmony, where emotions, especially disruptive or socially inappropriate ones, must be managed for the sake of familial and communal order. In this way, the red panda encapsulates inherited beliefs and the enduring influence of cultural expectations across generations.

As China becomes increasingly urbanized and globally connected, younger generations are beginning to question the long-held principles that shaped their parents and grandparents. In *Turning Red*, Mei's story captures this generational shift. Like many adolescents growing up in a rapidly changing world, she desires space for self-expression and emotional freedom, yet continues to carry the weight of her cultural legacy. Her family, particularly the older women, hold tightly to rituals and beliefs that once provided safety and order in a more rigid society. To them, sealing away the panda is not just tradition. It is a way to protect their children from the chaos of emotions and the judgment of the outside world. But for Mei, suppressing the panda means suppressing a part of herself. Her realization marks a

quiet rebellion: that embracing one's emotional complexity is not shameful, but necessary for authentic growth.

Therefore, the evolving view of the red panda within Mei's family reflects broader cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society, where traditional values increasingly collide with modern realities. As illustrated in pictures 3.26 to 3.28, Mei's intense emotions, whether joy, embarrassment, frustration, or sadness, are what trigger her transformation. This suggests that the red panda is not a random curse or inconvenience, but a visible manifestation of emotional intensity that refuses to be silenced. In many Asian cultural contexts, there is an unspoken pressure to maintain composure, avoid open conflict, and prioritize harmony, even when it means suppressing one's personal truth. Mei's transformation challenges this norm head-on, spotlighting the culturally discouraged aspects of vulnerability, disruption, and emotional authenticity.

Moreover, as previously discussed, Confucian values such as filial piety and collective identity have long shaped Mei's life as a young person of Chinese descent. These principles prioritize family reputation and social order over individual desire, often discouraging outward expressions of emotion, especially those perceived as disruptive or shameful. In this cultural context, the red panda comes to represent more than a personal struggle for Mei; it embodies a collective struggle within many Chinese families. It is the part of herself that cannot be compressed into silence or obedience, the emotional inheritance that demands acknowledgement and integration rather than rejection.

In the end of the film, *Turning Red* portrays tradition as dynamic rather than rigid set of rules. While Ming first insists on keeping the traditions and norms passed down from her own upbringing, the film gradually reveals the emotional complexities underlying these demands. Mei's transformation is framed within a rich cultural heritage, anchoring the film's supernatural elements in meaningful, real-world symbolism. Rather than exoticizing Chinese spiritual beliefs or depicting them as mystical or outdated, the narrative integrates them into the emotional and familial lives of the characters, making them feel intimate and relevant.

Ming's debate with her own mother, as well as her eventual acceptance of Mei's decision to embrace her panda, demonstrate that even hard customs allow for reinterpretation. In this context, respect for elders and heritage does not always equate to blind obedience or compliance. It can also mean honoring the past by thoughtfully adapting it to the present. This representation avoids stereotyping Chinese parenting as oppressive or authoritative. Instead, it portrays Chinese parenting as being rooted in love and shaped by sacrifice.

Ultimately, *Turning Red* illustrates that cultural identity is not static but continually negotiated between generations. Through Mei's journey, the film captures how inherited beliefs, values, and emotional codes are questioned, redefined, and ultimately reshaped to suit the changing realities. Rather than abandoning tradition, the story highlights the possibility of creating a new balance, where emotional authenticity and cultural heritage can coexist. This nuanced representation invites audiences to see Chinese culture as multifaceted, where tradition is not erased but reimagined through the lens of a new generation. The following chapter will draw together these findings to reflect on how *Turning Red* constructs cultural meaning and challenges dominant representations of Chinese identity in global media.