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Symbolism and stereotypes in the cultural depiction of *Turning Red* movie

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
  How to cite this article (APA Style): 	This paper explores the cultural representation in Turning Red, focusing on the use of symbolism and stereotypes. Through an analysis of key motifs and visual elements in the film examines how the narrative reflects and challenges cultural identities, particularly those within the Asian diaspora. The study applies a qualitative content analysis methodology, identifying and interpreting symbols related to culture, tradition, and family dynamics. Key results reveal that the film uses the metaphor of transformation to represent the protagonist's struggle with generational expectations while also highlighting stereotypes associated with Asian heritage. The analysis also shows how these symbols are both subverted and reinforced throughout the film, creating a complex portrayal of cultural identity. In conclusion, Turning Red presents a nuanced perspective on cultural representation, using symbolism and stereotypes to challenge and affirm cultural narratives, ultimately offering a deeper understanding of generational conflict and cultural belonging.

1. Introduction

All movies are based on specific issues and developed in a particular culture. The presence of cultural representation is now a common feature in movies. According to Owens (2020), there is a growing demand for more diversity and new representations in entertainment media (p. 60). Representation of a particular group or culture in movies can considerably impact what it represents. Tukachinsky et al. (2015) suggest that the quantity and quality of media representation influence racial attitudes toward the race being represented (p. 23). Representation can also help to create safe spaces for minorities. As movies have the power to change how people think and act, showing representation can help people become more aware and learn about different cultures. Nevertheless, showing cultural representation in movies can help fight racism and other forms of discrimination.

As the world's largest major film industry, Hollywood is increasingly embracing Asian characters and culture. Setiawan (2020) stated that a growing number of movies portray Chinese representation in North America. However, the inclusion of racial diversity has raised concerns about people being misrepresented and stereotyped on screen. For decades, Hollywood has stereotypically portrayed Asians. Moreover, Stereotypes of Hollywood movies influenced Americans' perception of Asians (Sriganeshvarun & Chien, 2020). Studies have found that racial stereotyping can have a negative effect on the race being represented. Umeda (2018) concludes that Stereotypes can limit how people should act based on their race, gender, or sexuality; even worse, images of stereotypes can lead to hate crimes (pp. 168-169).

In this study, the authors review cultural representations and stereotyping of Asians in Turning Red movie. Turning Red is an animated fantasy-comedy movie by Pixar, officially released on March 11, 2022. The movie tells a story of a 13-year-old girl named Meilin Lee the main character, who lives in Chinatown in Toronto. She experiences a unique situation where she can turn into a giant red panda when she gets too excited. As the movie portrays Asian cultures and characters, the viewers need to be aware of what culture is being represented and how the movie portrays Asian characters. This study is conducted qualitatively, with the writer focused on watching and collecting relevant data from the movie.

This study aims to understand the Chinese cultural identity's representation in Turning Red and how the movie stereotyped Asians as the main characters. There are various character types within a narrative, yet the central character garners the greatest interest, capturing the audience's primary focus of attention (Putriwana & Yustisia, 2021). It is expected to enrich the readers' knowledge regarding Chinese culture and stereotypes about Asians that can be seen in the movie Turning Red. Second, this final report is expected to encourage and add information sources for future studies about cultural representation in movies.

2.   Method

The methodology employed in this study involves a multifaceted approach to analyze the representation of Asian cultural identity and the perpetuation of stereotypes in Pixar's Turning Red. Firstly, a comprehensive viewing of the film was conducted to identify and document various cultural elements portrayed, including symbolism, language usage, and visual representations of Asian culture. Secondly, a thorough examination of character portrayals was undertaken to discern any stereotypical depictions of Asians, with a focus on common tropes such as the "smart Asian" and "tiger parenting" archetypes.

To further substantiate the analysis, relevant scholarly literature on cultural representation in cinema and the portrayal of Asians in media was consulted. This literature review provided theoretical frameworks and critical insights to contextualize the findings within broader cultural identity and stereotyping discussions. Additionally, primary sources such as interviews with filmmakers or production materials were sought to gain additional perspective on the creative decisions behind the portrayal of Chinese culture and characters in Turning Red.

The methodology also includes a comparative analysis with other films or media that depict Chinese culture or feature Asian characters to provide additional context and facilitate a nuanced

understanding of Turning Red's representation. Finally, the findings were synthesized and critically examined to conclude the film's treatment of Chinese cultural identity and its implications for perpetuating or challenging stereotypes about Asians.

3. Results and discussion

The results and discussion section thoroughly examines Pixar's Turning Red, focusing on its rich portrayal of Asian culture. The section highlights the film's immersion into modern-day Toronto's vibrant Chinatown through a detailed analysis of cultural symbols, traditions, and language. It critically evaluates the film's success in celebrating cultural richness and addresses challenges in navigating stereotypes associated with Asians in Western media. This nuanced exploration sheds light on the complexities of cultural representation in Turning Red and its broader implications for identity and representation in contemporary cinema.

3.1. The cultural representations

1. The portrayal of Red Panda

In Turning Red, the red panda emerges as the central icon and thematic cornerstone, epitomizing the film's title. The narrative unfolds through a new mythology intricately woven into the lineage of the Lee family, with the red panda motif at its core. Meilin Lee, the film's protagonist, inherits her transformative abilities from her ancestor, Sun Yee, whose connection to red pandas is revered throughout generations. The Lee family's furniture and residence, including their temple, prominently feature the distinctive panda accent, underscoring the significance of this cultural icon. As the story unfolds, the temple becomes a revered space honoring Sun Yee, who sought to protect her village and daughter during wartime. On a fateful night illuminated by a red moon, Sun Yee beseeched the gods for the power to transform into a red panda and defend her people. Her prayers were answered, allowing her to shift into a formidable red panda, symbolizing protection and emotional control. This extraordinary power is passed down through generations, culminating in Meilin Lee, who inherits the same transformative abilities, thus perpetuating the legacy of her ancestors' supernatural bond with the revered red panda.

Figure 1. The portrayal of the Red Panda in the movie

Even though the red panda has much to do with myths and beliefs in this movie, it does not have much mythological background. Even so, the character of the giant red panda is a fitting metaphor for Meilin's puberty. Scientifically, hormones during puberty are the leading cause of many social, behavioral, and emotional changes (Peper et al., 2013). Meilin experiences these changes; her exploding emotions are associated with her ability to transform instantly into a red panda. In the real world, the red panda is a mammal habitat in China, Nepal, and the Himalayan nations. These protected endangered animals are regarded as territorial and protective of their young (Spiezio et al., 2022).

Figure 2. A red panda in the wild

In the wild, red pandas are solitary and elusive creatures, primarily active during dawn and dusk, similar to the transformation pattern of Meilin Lee in the movie. Furthermore, the red panda's diet consists mainly of bamboo, supplemented by fruits, berries, and occasionally small mammals, reflecting the dietary preferences hinted at in Turning Red. Red pandas are also known for their distinctive red fur, which effectively camouflage in their forested habitats. This unique physical trait is mirrored in the film's portrayal of Meilin's red panda form, emphasizing the connection between the mythical creature and its real-life counterpart.

While Turning Red takes creative liberties with the portrayal of the red panda, particularly in its magical abilities and transformative powers, the film's depiction retains elements that echo the natural behaviors and characteristics of the real red panda species. This correlation adds depth and authenticity to the fictionalized representation, enriching the storytelling experience for audiences.

In another scene, ancestor worship is an intangible cultural aspect in Turning Red. This is an important cultural element as it is a belief held by the Meilin family. Practically, Meilin's family worships Sun Yee, Meilin's ancestor who first got the ability to transform into a red panda. According to the movie's narration, she asked the gods to grant her the ability to harness her emotions and transform into a red panda to protect her daughters and village. This gift was passed down to her daughters and female descendants.

Figure 3. Sun Yee and her two daughters *[00:27:57]*

Despite the movie's many fantastical elements, the depiction of this custom is mostly accurate. The Chinese culture has a long history of honoring dead and alive elders. Ancestor worship is prominent in Chinese society and is considered one of the most significant cultural practices (Hu, 2016).

2. *Red and green colour representation*

Red and green are the colors that stand out the most throughout the movie. These two colors can be found in almost all existing cultural and visual effects elements. Within Chinese culture, colors have profound and different symbolic meanings (Yu, 2014). Red and green are two of the five primary colors, in which each color corresponds to the five elements of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. Red symbolizes good fortune, happiness, and festivity, while green symbolizes life, peace, and vitality.

Figure 4. Red and green are the most prominent colors in the movie [01:07:12]

In Turning Red, the recurring use of red and green colors taps into the rich symbolic tradition of Chinese culture. Red, symbolizing happiness and prosperity, is omnipresent in festive scenes, while green, representing vitality and growth, mirrors themes of renewal and interconnectedness with nature. Meanwhile, in another scene, red and green colors appear side by side in the main character, Mei Li.

Figure 5. Mei Lee and Miriam in color contrast representations

Mei Lee's character wears a red palette throughout the movie, a clear contrast to the green palette worn by her friend Miriam. Miriam is a loyal and laid-back person known for her playful nature and ability to make her friends laugh when they need it most. Throughout the movie, Miriam is represented by the colour green, which is associated with calm, relaxation, and nurturing.

Another red and green color representation can be seen from Mei Lin and her mother. In *Turning Red*, the contrast between Mei Li and her mother, Ming, is subtly reflected in their relationship with the red and green color scheme. As the protagonist, Mei Li represents the color red, symbolizing her vibrant, emotional, and unrestrained nature, especially as she learns to embrace her red panda spirit. The red panda symbolizes Mei's growing self-awareness and acceptance of her emotions, marking her journey toward balance and personal growth.

Figure 6 Mei Li and her mother Ming in color contrast representation

On the other hand, Mei's mother, Ming, is often associated with green, representing control, repression, and a lack of balance. Ming's use of green colors in her clothing and her attempt to suppress the red panda spirit within Mei suggest her own struggles with accepting the panda's transformative power. Ming's actions and attitude towards the red panda are rooted in fear and desire for control—she forces Mei to repress her spirit, trying to maintain a sense of order and propriety. The contrast between red (Mei's acceptance of her inner self) and green (Ming's repressive tendencies) visually underscores the tension between the characters. While Mei learns to integrate the red panda into her identity, Ming is trapped in the mindset of repressing it, reflecting the broader generational conflict over self-expression versus control.
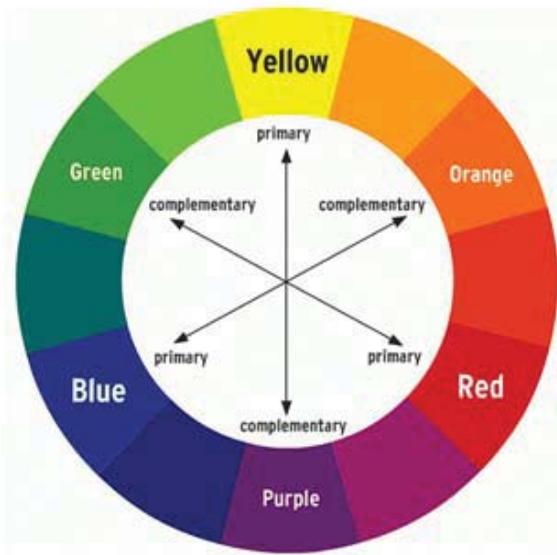

Figure 7. Green is the opposite of red in color wheel

The color red, being the opposite of green on the color wheel theory (thebass.org, n.d.), represents the balance between the two. These colors serve as visual cues, reinforcing the film's exploration of identity and the transition from one character and its contrast. They add depth to the narrative and balance to the storyline.

3. *The Chinese elements' embracements*

The rich incorporation of Chinese cultural elements in Turning Red enhances its authenticity and deepens the storytelling. From visual aesthetics to character interactions, these elements weave seamlessly into the narrative, celebrating the protagonist's heritage. The film highlights various aspects of Chinese culture, including the use of Cantonese language, traditional architectural styles in the main character's home, and iconic symbols like red lanterns. Additionally, Chinese cuisines, traditional attire such as the cheongsam, and practices like tai chi reflect a vibrant cultural backdrop that grounds the story in its roots while resonating universally. This section explores how these elements are embraced and showcased throughout the film.

In Turning Red, language emerges as a pivotal element by portraying Cantonese as the primary mode of communication within Meilin's family. The film subtly integrates Cantonese dialogue into various scenes, reflecting the characters' cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. This linguistic choice not only adds authenticity to the portrayal of the characters' familial dynamics but also serves as a nod to the multicultural tapestry of modern-day Toronto's Chinatown, where Cantonese remains a prevalent language among Chinese communities. As language is an element of culture, this aspect is present in the movie Turning Red. This movie features Cantonese as the mother – tongue language of Meilin's family. This language can be noticed on the classic Hong Kong Cantonese-language TV channel Meilin, and Ming watches when making Bao.

Figure 8. Meilin and Ming watch Cantonese TV channel *[00:09:50]*

Furthermore, the inclusion of Cantonese extends beyond mere dialogue, encompassing ritualistic chants and incantations performed by characters during key moments in the film. These ceremonial utterances, delivered in Cantonese, imbue the rituals with an air of authenticity and cultural specificity, reinforcing the film's commitment to portraying Chinese cultural traditions with reverence and accuracy. Through these linguistic nuances, Turning Red effectively captures the intricacies of cultural identity and expression, offering audiences a glimpse into the linguistic landscape of Chinatown and the cultural richness it embodies.

By foregrounding Cantonese as a prominent linguistic element in Turning Red, the film pays homage to its characters' linguistic heritage and underscores the importance of language as a vessel for cultural transmission and preservation. In doing so, Turning Red transcends mere entertainment, offering audiences a nuanced exploration of language, culture, and identity within the context of a heartfelt coming-of-age narrative.

The meticulous attention to detail in the portrayal of Asian, more likely Chinese, architecture adds depth and authenticity to the film's depiction of the cultural landscape. The Lee family temple, a central setting in the movie, is a poignant example of Pixar's commitment to capturing the essence of traditional Chinese architectural design. With its distinct upturned roof corners and intricate architectural embellishments, the temple is a visual testament to the rich cultural heritage and spiritual significance imbued within Chinese architectural traditions. The movie clearly represents Chinese

architecture in the Lee family temple and its architectural details. Pixar perfectly presents iconic Chinese buildings, which can be recognized mainly from their upturned roof corners and other building elements.

Figure 9. Lee family temple and house *[00:06:28]*

Furthermore, the portrayal of Chinese architecture in Turning Red is more than just a backdrop; it reflects cultural identity and values. Through meticulously recreating iconic Chinese buildings, Pixar pays homage to Chinese civilization's architectural legacy while celebrating its enduring influence on contemporary urban landscapes. By incorporating these architectural elements into the visual narrative, the film not only offers a window into the cultural richness of Chinese architecture but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the intricate craftsmanship and cultural symbolism embedded within these architectural marvels. Ultimately, the representation of Chinese architecture in Turning Red serves as a poignant reminder of the power of architecture to evoke a sense of place, identity, and cultural heritage within the cinematic landscape.

Figure 10. Meilin handed the Bao she made to her father *[00:06:28]*

In addition to its linguistic and cultural elements, Turning Red also showcases a diverse array of traditional Chinese foods, further enriching its portrayal of Chinese culture and familial traditions. Throughout the film, viewers are treated to tantalizing glimpses of culinary delights such as eel rice, congee (rice porridge), meatball soup, and pan-fried Chinese pancakes. These dishes serve as mouthwatering visual feasts and play a significant role in reinforcing the cultural authenticity and familial bonds depicted in the movie. The most recognizable food in the movie Turning Red is *Baozi*. They popped up when Ming gave Meilin a platter at their temple and also when Meilin and her family prepared dinner. *Baozi* or *Bao* is a steamed bun usually stuffed with minced meat or vegetables.

In certain regions in China, Baozi is traditionally eaten during the Chinese New Year or the last month of the Lunar Calendar as a tradition. The meticulous attention to detail in the portrayal of these culinary delights, from the fragrant aroma of freshly cooked rice to the sizzle of pan-fried pancakes, evokes a sensory immersion into the rich culinary heritage of Chinese cuisine. Through these gastronomic delights, the film celebrates the joy of communal dining and the importance of food as a symbol of love, togetherness, and cultural identity within the context of familial gatherings.

Figure 11. Turning Red has a lot of scenes with Chinese foods in it [*00:48:21*]

Moreover, the inclusion of traditional Chinese foods in Turning Red adds depth to the film's cultural landscape and serves as a means of cultural exchange and appreciation. By showcasing these culinary traditions to a global audience, the film educates viewers about the richness and diversity of Chinese cuisine and fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Through the universal language of food, Turning Red transcends cultural barriers, inviting audiences of all backgrounds to partake in the sensory delights and cultural richness of Chinese culinary traditions.

Traditional attire is a powerful cultural identity and heritage emblem, often imbued with centuries of tradition and symbolism. In Turning Red, the character Ming's consistent donning of the Cheongsam serves as a visual representation of her Chinese cultural heritage. The Cheongsam is characterized by its form-fitting silhouette, high collar, and intricate Shanghai button accents, exuding elegance and grace. Ming's choice to wear this traditional attire throughout the film pays homage to

her cultural roots. It serves as a testament to the enduring significance of traditional clothing in preserving and celebrating cultural identity.

Figure 9. Ming wearing Qipao [*00:10:06*]

The Cheongsam originated from the Manchurian costume during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) (China Insights, 2021). Throughout the movie, Ming always wears Qipao even though, in reality, it is usually only worn on special days such as weddings, parties, or special events (China Insights, 2021). Furthermore, the depiction of Ming in the Cheongsam underscores the importance of cultural authenticity and representation in cinematic storytelling. By incorporating traditional Chinese attire into the character's wardrobe, Turning Red adds visual richness to the film and fosters a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of Chinese culture and fashion. Through Ming's sartorial choices, the film highlights the timeless beauty and cultural significance of the Cheongsam while also inviting audiences to embrace and celebrate the diversity of cultural expressions depicted on screen.

The red lantern is one of the easily identifiable symbols of Chinese culture throughout the movie. Its existence contributes significantly to the creation of a thick Chinese cultural atmosphere. These lanterns can be seen along Chinatown's streets and at the Lee family temple.
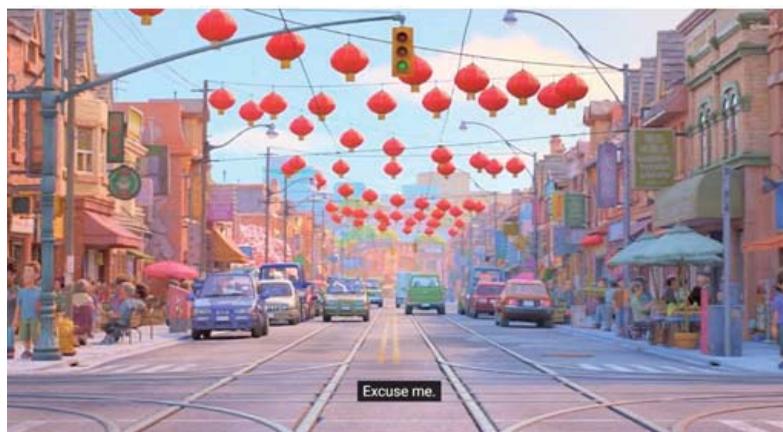

Figure 12. Red lanterns along Chinatown street [*00:06:15*]

According to historical records, Chinese lanterns have existed since the Eastern Han dynasty (25 to 220 AD) (The Chinese Language Institute, 2020). Initially, the Chinese hung lanterns before their doors to ward off evil spirits. To this day, the lantern has become a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, playing an important role in celebrations and ceremonies. In China, Red is a sign of good fortune, happiness, and festivity, which is why there are often a lot of red decorations at festivals and other celebrations. Red lanterns are the most common and represent prosperity in both business and personal life.

Tai chi is a minor cultural element in this movie. An older woman practicing Tai chi in the front yard of the Lee family temple represents it. Tai Chi, also known as Taijiquan, is an ancient Chinese martial art that combines traditional martial movements with energy circulation, breathing, stretching exercises, and other meditative and healthful elements (Liang, 2014).

Figure 11. An elderly woman performs Tai Chi [*01:10:50*]

Tai Chi originates from the Wudang Mountain between west and east China (Embassy of China in Indonesia, 2020). This martial art is known for its various soft and subtle styles. Therefore, Tai chi is often cultivated by the elderly who can no longer exercise with heavy portions. Tai Chi is gaining popularity due to abundant evidence demonstrating its health and fitness benefits (Huston et al., 2016). In addition, Tai Chi teaches meditation, which can be used to reduce stress and relax the mind.

3.2. *Asian stereotypes representations*

1. *Ming Lee tiger parenting*

The character of Meilin's mother, Ming Lee, is portrayed as an overprotective mother with a tiger parenting style. She is a "hyper-vigilant" character who raised Meilin with tough love. Ming and Meilin have a complex relationship. She controls Meilin's schedule strictly and dictates her to be a perfect and dutiful daughter. Ming significantly influences Meilin's life and choices. It showed when Ming once followed Meilin to school and humiliated her with the first-period issue in front of her classmates. Meilin did not actually have a period at the time; Ming simply made an assumption based

on Meilin's peculiar behaviour in the morning. Even though Ming had good intentions, her actions demonstrated an overprotective attitude and excessive worry.

Figure 13. Ming clashes with a security guard in front of Meilin's classmates[*00:23:05*]

After Meilin learns of her magical curse, Ming's overprotectiveness toward her worsens. She does not trust Meilin to go to a concert with her friends even though Meilin has done everything she can to persuade her. Ming's fear of her girl going out into the world gradually shows the seeds of rebellion in Meilin.

[00:37:53 —> 00:37:58] Meilin: I just have one teeny-tiny favor to ask.

[00:37:58 —> 00:38:00] Ming: No. Absolutely not.

[00:38:00 —> 00:38:04] Meilin: What? But this is once in a lifetime.

[00:38:04 —> 00: 38:11] Ming: Mei-Mei, it's one thing to stay calm at home or school, but a concert? You'll get whipped up into a frenzy and panda all over the place.

[00:38:11 —> 00:38:15] Meilin: I won't, I won't! I promise! You saw me keep it in.

[00:38:15 —> 00:38:18] Jin: Ming, maybe we should trust her.

[00:38:18 —> 00:38:19] Ming: It's them I don't trust.

....

[00:38:40 —> 00:38:46] Ming: And it's not worth jeopardizing your life over. Right, Jin?

Jin: Uh...

Ming: See? Your father agrees. No concert. And that's final.

Even after everything that happened, Ming blamed Meilin for the little freedom she wanted. Meilin's decision to keep her panda is deeply affected her mother. She became outraged and released the red panda spirit that was once locked inside her necklace.

[01:10:43 —> 01:10:45] Ming: How could she?

[01:10:48 —> 01:10:50] Ming: How could she do this to...

[01:10:50 —> 01:10:52] Ming: her own mother?

Figure 14. Ming got angry with Meilin [*01:10:50*]

The term "tiger mom" first appeared in 2011 when Amy Chua, a professor at Yale Law School, published her book The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother. According to Chua (2011), "tiger mom" is the most common stereotype of Chinese parenting in the United States. Americans have the impression that tiger moms are extremely controlling, strict, and severe, almost to the point of being abusive (Chua, 2011). This parenting style focuses on encouraging children to perform well in school and accomplish a great deal at a young age. Tiger parents are deeply invested in their children's success and have high expectations for them. Even to achieve these expectations, they will occasionally suffocate the child in the process.

2. *Smart Asians stereotype*

Asians are often associated with the image of intelligent, hardworking, and successful people (Thompson et al.). Likewise, the portrayal of Meilin's character in the movie Turning Red. She is portrayed as a bright teenage girl who excels at almost everything. Academically, she is an expert in Algebra, French, and Earth Science. Her perfect grades support this in all three classes: 100 percent in Earth science, an A+ in algebra, and an excellent predicate in French.

Figure 15. Meilin proudly showed her mother her perfect scores [*00:07:12*]

Meilin is also presented as a character who is very active in the classroom. Even when the rest of her classmates showed signs of boredom and were not interested in the subject being taught, Meilin stood out as the student who consistently volunteered to answer every question the teacher asked.

Figure 16. Meilin is a highly engaged student [*00:02:48*]

Meilin not only does well academically but also appears to be quite active in non-academic activities. In the opening scene, she passionately plays the flute and shows how well she knows how to play the instrument. In another scene, photos and trophies are also shown when she wins a badminton championship and music competitions.

Figure 17. Meilin is good at playing the flute [*00:03:04*]

The portrayal of Meilin in Turning Red reflects the pervasive stereotype of "smart Asians" commonly found in Western media, where individuals of Asian descent are often depicted as inherently intelligent and academically successful. Meilin's character exemplifies these traits, excelling both academically and in extracurricular activities such as playing the flute and winning championships. However, while Meilin's accomplishments may be commendable, they also highlight the danger of reducing individuals to stereotypes, overlooking their individuality and diverse talents.

4.   Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the cultural representation and Asian stereotypes in the movie Turning Red. After reviewing this movie, the author concludes that Turning Red depicts elements of thick Asian culture, particularly Chinese culture. The representation of Chinese culture in this movie is direct and recognizable even by the average viewer. This movie's cultural representations include red panda, ancestor worship, the color red and green, Cantonese language, Chinese architecture, Chinese cuisines, Chinese costume, red lantern, and Tai chi. The movie Turning Red also contains numerous representations of Asian society. However, in an attempt to make Asians more relatable, the movie reinforces stereotypes. This film perpetuates some stereotypes, such as tiger mom and straight-A student. Drawing the result with the study's limitation, further analysis is expected to reveal the impact of cultural representations and Asian stereotypes in the movie on the people being represented.

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