

Negotiating Cultural Identity of Mei Lee in *Turning Red* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization, second-generation immigrants often face complex challenges in negotiating their cultural identity as they balance heritage values with the norms of their host country. This study aims to analyze how the main character in the film *Turning Red* (2022) negotiates her cultural identity within a Chinese-Canadian family. This study applies Will Kymlicka's (1995) theory of multiculturalism as an analytical approach, focusing on the concepts of polyethnic rights and internal restrictions. This research uses a qualitative content analysis with the main data source in the form of dialogue. The findings indicate that the main character, Mei, initially experiences strong internal restrictions imposed by her family, which limit her individual autonomy. However, as the film progresses, she gradually asserts her individuality and redefines her identity. She can finally control the inner red panda within herself that will come out whenever she is too emotional, and it symbolizes the success in balancing her sense of belonging to her culture with her individual autonomy.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Multiculturalism, Individual Autonomy

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, migration has become one of the main forces reshaping the way societies grow and function. This global phenomenon is clearly reflected in the history of the Chinese diaspora in Canada. According to Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (2023), immigration accounts for about seventy-five percent of the country's population growth. This significant contribution highlights Canada's position as a leading multicultural country (Attiba, 2024). However, when people move across national borders, they bring and implement their languages, traditions, and values with them while arriving, resulting in diverse societies where multiple cultures coexist within a shared national framework.

This history of Chinese migration to Canada also reveals differences in adaptation across generations. For 1.5- and second-generation migrants, negotiating ethnic identity presents a significant challenge as they are torn between their culture of origin and the culture of the host country (Dizon et al., 2021). These experiences show that migration exposes individuals to new norms, values, and traditions, leading them to renegotiate their identity and sense of belonging (Naz, 2024).

The presence of Chinese communities has long been visible across Canada (Rasulov, 2025). Because of this, cultural issues continue to play an important role in reshaping and rebuilding Canadian society and history. In the modern era of globalization, interaction among individuals and groups makes discussions about cultural identity increasingly visible and

relevant, especially through film (Aanayo, 2023). Film is a media production that could affect how individuals understand and express their identity, as global influences also spread rapidly through visual narratives. This topic is important to examine because film is one of the most accessible and impactful forms of communication and art. Films are able to reach audiences across various cultures, societies, and generations by combining narrative, visuals, sound, and performance. Films themselves are basically cultural products that can describe social conditions by documenting and recording various social phenomena in various scenes (Pratama & Wulandari, 2024).

In 2022, The Walt Disney Company collaborated with Pixar to release a film titled *Turning Red*, a coming-of-age drama featuring a Chinese-Canadian character. The film is widely recognized for addressing the issue of cultural identity acceptance during adolescence. It tells the story of Meilin Lee, a 13-year-old girl living in Toronto in the early 2000s. The film not only portrays teenage life but also illustrates the complexity of identity, culture, and intergenerational conflict. Mei experiences challenges related to puberty, friendship, her interest in pop culture, and her strong sense of responsibility toward her family.

Through this portrayal, *Turning Red* provides insight into how cultural identity is formed within Asian diaspora families, particularly in a multicultural society like Canada. This perspective aligns with Will Kymlicka's view on multicultural citizenship, which suggests that cultural identity is shaped not only by personal factors but also by broader social and political structures surrounding minority groups. Kymlicka (1995) explains that individuals from minority cultures navigate their identities while balancing the values of their heritage communities and the expectations of the dominant society (Kymlicka, 1995). In the film, Mei's experience clearly illustrates this negotiation as she moves between family traditions and the realities of growing up in a multicultural environment. From this perspective, Mei represents how minority identities are continuously shaped, tested, and reconstructed through interactions between cultural heritage and the freedoms offered by a multicultural society.

Several academic studies have used *Turning Red* (2022) as their object of analysis. Floriani (2023) explored the psychological reasons behind Mei Lee's transformation into a red panda, using Freud's theory of anxiety for the analysis. The findings show that Mei experiences three types of anxiety: realistic, moral, and neurotic, which are triggered by social pressure, fear of judgment from others, and guilt toward her mother. These findings show that Mei's transformation symbolizes the inner conflict and psychological pressure during puberty (Floriani, 2023).

In addition, Tóth (2025) examined Mei's identity crisis by examining the psychological and social challenges she faced during adolescence. The study argued that Mei's transformation into a red panda symbolized the conflict between her authentic self and external expectations. The findings indicated that Mei resolved her identity crisis through self-acceptance and reconciling her personal desires with her family's expectations.

Furthermore, Ramadhani and Wardoyo (2025) investigated how cultural expectations shape identity formation. They argue that Western individualism often conflicts with Asian cultural values. The findings highlight how the film portrays intergenerational conflict, family responsibility, and the challenge of balancing cultural and personal identity. Similarly, Chen & Liu (2023) examined the film *Turning Red* from the perspective of cultural hybridity by investigating how Chinese audiences responded to its portrayal of Chinese and Western cultures. They found that audiences appreciated the film primarily because it addressed universal themes (Chen & Liu, 2023).

A review of previous studies shows that there is still no research that specifically analyzes *Turning Red* (2022) using the perspective of multicultural citizenship, particularly through Will Kymlicka's theoretical framework.

Will Kymlicka's theory of multiculturalism directly addresses how minority groups experience life in liberal democratic countries such as Canada. His perspective is especially useful in explaining the challenges faced by second-generation immigrants. Individuals like Mei Lee grow up navigating two cultural systems at once: the norms of the host country and the values of their cultural heritage. Kymlicka's theory helps explain that this dual experience is not necessarily a form of conflict, but rather a natural condition in a multicultural society where cultural preservation and social integration occur simultaneously.

Applying this framework to *Turning Red* allows the narrative to be understood within a broader social and political context. Canada's multicultural policies provide space for families like the Lees to maintain their Chinese traditions openly, while also encouraging younger generations to explore their identities within wider Canadian culture.

Although multiculturalism is a commonly-used framework in literary and media studies, only a few studies have applied it directly to *Turning Red* (2022). However, this framework has ever been used in other studies examining multicultural narratives. One notable example is Pratama and Wulandari's (2024) study of a Chinese American teenager in the short film *Americanized* (2021). This study analyzed how identity negotiation can lead to marginalization among fifth-generation Chinese Americans. The findings show that the main character faces both psychological and social challenges while attempting to assimilate into multiple cultural communities.

Then, bringing novelty and difference compared to other studies above, this study aims to analyze the negotiation of cultural identity and individual rights in *Turning Red* (2022). Using Will Kymlicka's multiculturalism, the focus of this study lies on the tension between the polyethnic rights of the family and the individual autonomy of the main character. This study provides a new perspective on how diaspora youth negotiate their personal rights in a multicultural environment with multicultural policy, such as in Canada.

METHOD

This study utilized the theoretical framework of multiculturalism by Will Kymlicka (1995). Kymlicka (1995) argues that minority groups in multicultural societies require group-based differentiated rights, which allow them to maintain their cultural heritage while participating equally in the broader society's culture. His theory includes two key concepts relevant to this study, namely (1) Polyethnic Rights, rights allowing immigrant groups to maintain cultural practices while integrating into the practices of the host country; (2) Internal Restrictions, restrictions imposed by cultural groups on individual members, which Kymlicka opposes because they limit personal autonomy.

These theoretical insights were utilized to analyze the character of Mei in the film *Turning Red* (2022), directed by Domee Shi. This research method is qualitative content analysis. The data source is selected dialogues from the film *Turning Red* (2022) that were selected purposively. The scene selection criteria were based on relevance to Kymlicka's (1995) main concepts, namely polyethnic rights and internal restrictions. For example, dialogues showing interactions between traditional family members or symbols of Chinese culture are classified as polyethnic rights, and dialogues of Mei's conflict with her mother and family indicate internal restrictions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses how cultural background and generational differences shape Mei's process of identity negotiation in *Turning Red* (2022). The discussion emphasizes the tension between Mei's upbringing in a traditional Chinese immigrant family and her wish to become part of broader Canadian culture. The analysis is based on Will Kymlicka's concepts of polyethnic rights and internal restrictions. Mei's development shows that second-generation immigrant identity is formed through an ongoing process of negotiation between cultural belonging and personal freedom.

PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY WITHIN MEI'S FAMILY

In the film *Turning Red* (2022), polyethnic rights are vividly depicted through the Lee family's efforts to preserve their ancestral temple in downtown Toronto. This building serves not only as a place of worship, but it also represents the institutionalization of minority heritage in Canadian public space. The temple's presence signifies that Canadian society provides a supportive environment for diaspora families to maintain their traditions while participating in broader national life. Mei's role as a temple guide demonstrates her dual identity as both a person of Chinese descent and a Canadian citizen. The following dialogue, which takes place at the beginning of the film, illustrates how the Lee family expresses their polyethnic rights and introduces their unique heritage to the public.

- Ming : *"Our family runs one of the oldest temples in Toronto. And the most unique. Instead of honoring a god, we honor our ancestors."*
- Mei : *"And not just the dudes either."*
- Ming : *"Our most revered ancestors, Sun Yee, was a scholar, poet, and defender of animals. She dedicated her life to the creatures of the forest. Especially, the Red Panda."*
- Mei : *"Ta-da!"*
- Ming : *"Which she loved for its fiery coat and mischievous nature. Ever since, the red panda has blessed our family with good fortune and prosperity."*
- Mei : *"And it can bless yours, too!"*

(Time code 00:08:30 – 00:09:03)

This exchange shows that the Lee family actively exercises its polyethnic rights within Canadian society. When Ming says that her family runs "one of the oldest temples in Toronto," she is not simply giving background information but also showing that minority traditions can become part of the host country's institutional landscape.

This scene vividly celebrates the Lee family's heritage, in line with Kymlicka's idea that immigrant (polyethnic) cultures must be supported by social accommodation. The film treats the Mei family's Chinese culture as something to be openly practiced and respected within their Canadian context. By sharing this tradition with visitors, the Lee family does not

treat its culture as something hidden or separate. Instead, the family presents its heritage as part of the city's broader cultural life. According to Kymlicka (1995), polyethnic rights aim to ensure that ethnic groups can express their cultural uniqueness without facing marginalization. In this sense, the Lee family's traditions are not pushed aside, but are instead positioned as part of Canada's multicultural identity. The scene demonstrates that cultural expression is socially accepted and publicly visible, which reflects how multicultural policy can support diversity as something valued rather than excluded.

INTERNAL RESTRICTIONS AND THE CONFLICT OF MATERNAL EXPECTATIONS

The conflict between Mei and her mother has deep roots in their cultural differences, reflecting a broader tension. Ming represents traditional Chinese cultural expectations that emphasize obedience, emotional control, and loyalty to parents. At the same time, Mei, growing up in a Western environment, begins to adopt values that prioritize personal freedom, emotional expression, and individual identity. This cultural gap shapes the way Ming interprets Mei's behavioural changes as a threat to family harmony and cultural integrity. Consequently, Ming attempts to control Mei's behaviour, reflecting what Kymlicka (1995) describes as internal restrictions.

Kymlicka defines internal restrictions as attempts by cultural groups to limit the freedom of their own members in the name of group solidarity or cultural integrity. Although these restrictions may be intended to preserve cultural integrity, Kymlicka argues that they become problematic when they limit individuals' freedom to make meaningful choices about their identity and way of life.

Mei : *"You sicko! What were you thinking? Why would you draw those things? Those horrible, awful, sexy things? It's fine. You'll move to another city, change your identity."*

Mei : *"Mommy, I'm so sorry."*

Mei : *"You are her pride and joy, so act like it."*

(Time code 00:14:22 – 00:14:43)

This scene illustrates that internal restrictions do not always appear as direct punishment. Instead, they can work through emotional pressure inside the family. Mei's reaction shows shame, fear, and panic after her drawing is discovered. Her immediate apology, "Mommy, I'm so sorry," reveals her fear of letting her mother down and failing to meet family expectations. Rather than defending herself, Mei accepts the blame and believes that she has done something wrong. More importantly, when she tells herself, "You are her pride and joy, so act like it," she begins to discipline herself by adopting her mother's standards.

Therefore, Mei's initial efforts to uphold her family's honor reflect a deep sense of gratitude for her cultural heritage. This behaviour highlights the influence of traditional Chinese values in shaping Mei's internal perspective and external behaviour, effectively shaping her identity through the lens of loyalty to her parents. This reflects what Kymlicka (1995) describes as internal restrictions, where cultural groups attempt to regulate their members' behaviour to preserve collective traditions and maintain group solidarity. In this

scene, restrictions no longer require Ming's explicit enforcement, but Mei becomes the agent of regulation herself. This violates Kymlicka's requirement of individual autonomy, as Mei no longer acts based on her own desires, but rather based on a predetermined scenario of child obedience to parents that prevents her from exploring her developing identity.

The film also shows that these restrictions can be enforced directly through parental authority. In this situation, Ming takes an active role in controlling Mei's behavior by treating outside influences as threats to her daughter's moral and cultural values. This is clearly seen when Ming finds Mei at Tyler's party and immediately blames her friends, as shown in the following dialogue.

Ming : *"I knew you were trouble, putting all these thoughts into Mei-Mei's head, parading her around. Now she's lying, sneaking out. She attacked a defenseless boy. You think this is a joke? Do you know how dangerous this is?"*

Miriam : *"We didn't mean to. We just wanted to see 4-Town."*

Ming : *"4-Town! You manipulated her for a bunch of tacky delinquents?"*

Miriam : *"No! She wanted to..."*

Ming : *"Don't you blame her. She's a good girl, and you've taken advantage of her."*

(Time code 01:00:29 – 01:00:55)

This dialogue shows how internal restrictions are enforced by redefining external influences as a moral threat. More specifically, these findings reflect the concept of "internal restrictions" proposed by Kymlicka, in which members of minority groups are subject to restrictions imposed by their own communities in order to preserve cultural values and collective identity. Through the parental authority embodied by Ming, the film illustrates how these restrictions operate within the family, thereby limiting Mei's autonomy in the name of cultural preservation.

From Ming's point of view, she is protecting her daughter from "tacky delinquents," which is an act of protecting the family's moral integrity from external influences. However, Kymlicka warns that groups often use the excuse of "protecting culture" to justify suppressing individuals' rights to interact with the broader society's culture. This idea is reflected when Ming insists, "She is a good girl, and you have taken advantage of her." This statement defines Mei's identity in terms of obedience and moral purity, suggesting that any deviation must be caused by outside influences rather than Mei's own choice.

THE RED PANDA AS A SYMBOLIC NEGOTIATION OF INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

After experiencing intense cultural pressure and strict maternal control, Mei's journey does not end with silent obedience. Instead, the red panda slowly transforms from a symbol of shame to a symbol of identity. While early scenes show how cultural expectations limit Mei's behaviour, the film's final stages depict her active efforts to negotiate those expectations.

The film's final stages depict the transition from internal restrictions to a more inclusive understanding of cultural belonging. Rather than abandoning her cultural heritage rooted in

China, Mei reconnects with that heritage, illustrating how the concepts of internal restrictions and polyethnic rights, as defined by Kymlicka, work in harmony to shape minority identity.

In *Turning Red*, the inner red panda within herself becomes a symbolic space where this negotiation takes place. This process reflects the idea that individual autonomy involves the freedom to question, revise, and redefine inherited norms, as discussed by Will Kymlicka.

Mei : *"I'm not your little Mei-Mei anymore! I lied, Mom!"*

Ming : *"What?"*

Mei : *"It was my idea to hustle the panda. My idea to go to Tyler's party! It was all me! I like boys! I like loud music! I like gyrating! I'm 13! Deal with it!"*

(Time code 01:17:59 – 01:18:35)

This confrontation becomes an important turning point in Mei's identity negotiation. This finding marked the moment when Mei openly defied the internal restrictions imposed by her family. When she says that she is no longer little Mei-Mei, she symbolically rejects the identity that her mother has constructed for her. By refusing that label, Mei creates a new self-definition that challenges both her mother's authority and the cultural expectations placed on her. She shows that she can be Chinese, she can be a girl, and she can also be someone who enjoys boy bands and personal freedom.

Instead of blaming her friends, Mei takes full responsibility for what she has done. This marks a shift from passive obedience to active self-determination. From Kymlicka's point of view, a free society not only allows people to live their lives but also allows them to step back and ask whether they are on the right path. For much of her life, Mei's loyalty has been tied to her mother's expectations, but at this moment, she realizes that being the perfect daughter is not the same as being happy. Consequently, she chooses to change direction.

The conflict is also driven by the contrast between her home environment and the outside world. While her family does not want her to change or move away from tradition, Toronto's liberal setting offers the opposite. This setting gives Mei access to other ways of living. Through her friends and her interests, she begins to see another version of what it means to be a teenager. The film does not suggest that society forces her to rebel; rather, it shows that society makes change possible. Mei's emotional explosion at the concert comes from feelings she has been holding in for a long time, but the real negotiation happens when her ritual fails. At that point, she moves from simply speaking about autonomy to actually living it.

Ming : *"Mei-mei?"*

Mei : *"I'm keeping it."*

Grandma: *"What did she say?"*

Aunt : *"Keeping it?"*

Mei : *"I'm keeping it!"*

(Time code 01:09:56 – 01:10:06)

Ming : *"No. Mei-mei, please. Just come with me."*

Mei : *"I'm changing, Mom. I'm finally figuring out who I am."*

(Time code 01:25:12 – 01:25:25)

When the ritual fails and Mei declares her intention to keep the inner red panda, she rejects the internal restrictions her family has used for generations to keep women pure and controlled. According to Kymlicka, a culture should not prevent its members from evolving, but rather, it is right and proper for a culture to change based on the choices of its members (Kymlicka, 1995). When Mei finally takes a stand and tells her mother that she has finally found herself, she fulfills two essential conditions that Kymlicka describes as requirements for a good life. First, Kymlicka argues that we must be able to live our lives from within (Kymlicka, 1995). This means living according to our own beliefs about what makes life valuable, rather than having those values imposed on us.

By choosing to keep her inner red Panda, Mei is no longer doing something for her mother or her family, but she is following her inner compass. She claims the freedom to live according to herself, without the fear of punishment or moral enforcement that the ritual represents. Second, Mei's growth depends on her freedom to question the beliefs imposed on her since childhood. Kymlicka notes that individuals need the conditions to examine their lives based on other examples and arguments. Because Mei lives in a society that values freedom of expression and association, she is able to examine her environment to judge for herself what is truly valuable.

Mei's negotiation is successful because she shifts from a life of forced obedience to one lived from within. She remains connected to her culture, but she does so on her own terms, proving Kymlicka's point that the true power of a culture lies not in its ability to restrict its members, but in its ability to give them the freedom to decide who they want to be. The ending of the film depicts a harmonious situation in which the Lee family finally accepts Mei's red panda. This shift from fear to acceptance changes the family dynamic from one of internal restriction to one of supportive cultural membership.

Mei : *"We've all got an inner beast. We've all got a messy, loud, weird part of ourselves hidden away. And lot of us never let it out. But I did."*

(Time code 01:28:42 – 01:28:55)

This scene appears near the end of the film, when Mei reflects on her journey while the temple wall displays a framed photo of Mei and her friends with the members of 4*Town. In the background, Mei gives a monologue that shows her awareness of and acceptance of her red panda side. This scene reflects how her personal growth is influenced not only by her family background but also by her experiences and relationships with her friends.

The happy ending also illustrates Kymlicka's view that cultural exchange does not destroy a group, but instead enriches it (Kymlicka, 1995). When Ming and the rest of the family decide to live alongside Mei's inner red panda, they show that their heritage does not depend on cultural purity. By accepting Mei as she is, the family moves away from moral control and creates a more flexible and resilient form of Chinese-Canadian culture.

The fact that the family is now able to live happily, even with the presence of a panda that was once seen as messy, proves Kymlicka's argument that individual autonomy and cultural belonging are not opposites. Mei continues serving at the temple and honoring both her ancestors and her mother's values, while also remaining an independent person. Overall, this ending connects the two concepts that form the foundation of this study. The rejection of imposed family control signifies the weakening of internal restrictions, while the family's eventual acceptance of Mei's chosen identity reflects a recognition of polyethnic rights, allowing cultural identity and individual autonomy to coexist. Through Mei's journey, *Turning Red* ultimately supports Kymlicka's argument that multiculturalism is at its strongest when minority cultures empower, rather than restrict, the people who are part of them.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this analysis indicate that the film *Turning Red* (2022) offers an interesting depiction of cultural identity negotiation through the character of Mei Lee in a multicultural society. The film depicts how second-generation immigrants navigate the tension between preserving their cultural heritage and pursuing individual autonomy. Initially, Mei finds herself immersed in her family's traditional Chinese values, which emphasize obedience, emotional control, and loyalty. This situation reflects what Will Kymlicka defines as internal restrictions, where a cultural group restricts individual members in order to preserve collective identity and moral integrity.

However, as the story progresses, Mei begins to challenge these restrictions and assert her personal identity. Her symbolic transformation into a red panda represents her inner struggle and her gradual acceptance of her individuality. Through her journey, Mei demonstrates that cultural identity is not static but is continually negotiated through personal experiences and social interactions. This aligns with Kymlicka's concept of multiculturalism, which emphasizes that individuals should have the freedom to question, reinterpret, and redefine their cultural values while remaining connected to their heritage.

Furthermore, the film highlights the role of multicultural environments, such as Canada, in facilitating these negotiations. The presence of polyethnic rights allows families like the Lees to openly preserve their traditions while at the same time introducing younger generations to alternative ways of life. Mei's decision to embrace her cultural background and personal desires illustrates that individual autonomy and cultural belonging are not contradictory, but rather complementary. In conclusion, *Turning Red* (2022) successfully demonstrates that identity negotiation is a crucial process for diasporic youth. Mei's transformation to active self-determination reflects a broader redefinition of cultural identity, where individuals are empowered to shape their own lives while maintaining meaningful connections to their cultural roots.

Despite these findings, this study has several limitations. First, this analysis is based on a case study of a single film, which limits the ability to generalize these findings to other films or other multicultural contexts. Second, as a qualitative textual analysis, the interpretations presented are subjective and depend on how the researcher interprets the film. Future research could address these limitations by examining various films that depict diaspora identities, comparing representations across different cultural contexts, or incorporating audience reception studies through interviews, surveys, or focus groups. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how multicultural values and identity negotiations are represented in the media.

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