

Chapter 5

Asian Canadian Representation and Feminism for Middle Grades Students in *Embrace the Panda* and *Turning Red*

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ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, the author explores how transnational feminism is represented in two film texts: *Turning Red* and *Embrace the Panda: The Making of Turning Red*. These perspectives highlight the experiences of a Chinese Canadian teen as she comes of age, and how these experiences were created by four key women in the leadership team. Fiction signposts are used for framing the lessons that can be used in the classroom as well as key scenes from both films. Encouraging close reading along with keeping a multimodal journal would help students to develop an awareness of the struggles of specific teens as well as connecting to their own experiences.*

INTRODUCTION

While Asian Americans are often under-represented in mainstream media, the representations that are present often rely on the stereotype of the model minority, the false idea that all Asian and Asian American children are model straight-A students. Part of this stereotype is that these children are also always obedient to their parents, which for girls signifies *guai* or the “good girl” (Chen & Lau, 2020). There are few counter-narratives to these stereotypes, but this year, Pixar released *Turning Red* (Shi, 2022) on Disney+ that tells a different story. While this film is engaging on its own, it is also notable. The Director, Domee Shi, is both the first person of Asian ethnicity and the first woman to direct a Pixar film. *Turning Red* is also valuable because it centers around fundamental experiences from a young Chinese Canadian girl’s perspective.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5394-0.ch005

In *Turning Red*, a 13-year-old Chinese-Canadian girl named Meilin struggles against her mother's expectations as she befriends girls the mother doesn't like and as she is a devoted fan to a boy band. These desires run counter to her mother's Chinese expectations of a young girl, and the two struggle in their relationships with one another. When, one day, Mei unexpectedly wakes up as a giant red panda, it becomes even more complicated. Her mother doesn't see the panda transformation; instead, she thinks that Mei has gotten her period for the first time, so she runs in with a variety of feminine products. Though some parents have objected to how Mei reacts against her parents, which is ultimately accepted (Barnes, 2022), what ensues is a wonderful coming-of-age film as Mei discovers how to be a young woman, one who loves both her parents and their culture as well as one who is brave enough to define what she herself wants in life separate from those expectations. It explores a mother-daughter relationship with its complexities, and it embraces what it really feels like to be a young woman trying to figure out her place as a teen.

There is also a documentary made about *Turning Red* called *Embrace the Panda: Making Turning Red* (Milsom, 2022), and this documentary explores the contributions and lives of the four women in the leadership team for the film. This film highlights the contributions of Domee Shi, the Director, Rona Liu, the Art Director, Lindsey Collins, the Executive Producer, and Danielle Feinberg, the Visual Effects Supervisor. Not only are these women sympathetic to Mei's teenage experiences because they were each 13-year-old girls, the director and art director are also Asian-Canadian and Asian-American respectively as both immigrated from China with their parents in their childhoods. They understand what the expectations are for being a "good Chinese girl" who is growing up in another culture that doesn't have the same values, yet they also create a film that explores a counter-narrative to those expectations.

Both *Turning Red* and *Embrace the Panda* allow space for feminist understandings with a transnational perspective. Therefore, in this chapter, the author will explore how creating *Turning Red* was a transnational and feminist act (Ahmed, 2017; Ku, 2019a, 2019b), and how teaching the documentary using signposts (Beers & Probst, 2013) will help students to see these perspectives.

BACKGROUND

In film studies around Asian filmmaking and visual studies, one of the aspects of film that the scholar Yoon Jeong Oh explores is how spatiality is represented in Korean films. Though Yoon (2022) presents a much larger argument about how Bong Joon Ho's early films represent spatiality, transnationalism, and geography in ways that reposition post-colonialism beyond a local space, e.g., one country, toward a blending of different spaces, people, and non-human or non-living entities. For instance, Yoon explores how this repositioning occurs in *Okja* (Boon, 2016), which is a film about a giant genetically-modified pig and a young Korean girl named Mija. Yoon discusses how the landscapes change from idyllic Korean countryside where *Okja* and Mija live to the busy New York City landscape after *Okja* is kidnapped to put on display. This film, according to Yoon, the anime-style represented in the countryside is juxtaposed with the urban cityscape in a way that abstracts the countryside, making it more akin to nature and life, and the city being dangerous to non-human life and/or nature. Yoon states:

In order for the space for an Other to exist as the founding of this planet, not just in an imagination that generates nostalgia, a new social space must emerge to confirm the possibility of encounters. Otherwise,

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