

Unmasking Mei: A Lacanian psychoanalytic study of identity formation in *Turning Red* movie

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted: 13 June 2025

Revised: 15 August 2025

Accepted: 25 November 2025

Published: 15 December 2025

Keywords:

Identity Formation,
Psychoanalysis, The Imaginary,
The Symbolic, The Real

ABSTRACT

This study applies Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis theory to analyze the identity formation of Mei, the main character in the movie *Turning Red*. Using a qualitative method with content analysis, it explores Mei's identity development throughout the film. The results show that Lacan's theories of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real significantly shape the main character's identity. Mei's transformation into a red panda is crucial in this process. The Imaginary aspect drives her to embody the ideal princess, highlighting the influence of parental expectations and social norms on her self-image. The Symbolic dimension reveals her internal conflicts and pressures from family rules related to cultural traditions, while the Real reflects her rejection of the tradition of sealing the red panda. This analysis demonstrates that Mei's identity is shaped by societal pressures, social norms, and family traditions. The study contributes to the discourse on animated films and psychoanalysis by showing how teenage girls navigate internal psychological conflicts influenced by idealized images. Ultimately, it emphasizes the exploration of identity formation within a cultural context, showcasing psychoanalysis as a tool for understanding individual identity development.

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How to cite:

Dewanti, E., Rusfandi., & Sari, N. (2025). Unmasking Mei: A Lacanian psychoanalytic study of identity formation in *Turning Red* movie. *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics*, 12(2), 1049-1071.
<https://doi.org/10.22219/celtic.v12i2.41813>

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Lacan, as a follower of Freud in the development of psychoanalysis, introduces how the experience of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real shapes the personality of the main character in the movie (May-Hobbs, 2023; Tampubolon & Arianto, 2022). This theory is very useful to explore how experiences and social interactions shape the character's identity in the movie (Wargadinata et al., 2021). In addition, Lacan in his analysis views identity formation as a process influenced by language and shaped through the context of symbols and culture, where words create distance between self and reality (Wright, 2021).

According to Lacan, identity is not a fixed concept but rather a complex and dynamic process that reflects an individual's psychology. The interaction among the three stages demonstrates that identity is continually shaped by both external and internal influences, including social relationships, symbolic structures, and personal experiences (May-Hobbs, 2023). By examining how these three stages interact, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human psychology in shaping identity amidst various emotional and social pressures. Lacan's theory provides a framework for analyzing the development, transformation, and adaptation of identity throughout a person's life (Ragland, 2015).

The Imaginary relates to images, illusions, and ego formation, where individuals create fantasies and identifications that are often based on idealized self-images (Ragland, 2015). This process involves identification and reflection, which play an important role in the formation of the ego and sense of self (Hendrix, 2019; May-Hobbs, 2023), characterized by illusions, fantasies, and individualism that shape self-perception and relationships with others. The Imaginary influences identity through the processes of identification and self-formation. When individuals base their identity on an idealized image, they may face an identity crisis if reality diverges from their fantasy. Thus, the Imaginary connects to the Symbolic in social interactions, as social symbols shape self-perception. In daily life, the Imaginary reflects how a person forms an image of himself based on experience and self-perception, influenced by social interactions and desired perceptions. Identity is often associated with how a person views himself, based on his illusions, fantasies, and expectations. This explanation aligns with Hendrix's views (2019) in his article, which highlight the significant role of processes in shaping identity and how an individual views himself amidst social interactions and personal experiences.

The next is the Symbolic, which refers to aspects of language, culture, and social norms that shape human experience to mediate individual interactions with the world (Hendrix, 2019; May-Hobbs, 2023). Through the Symbolic, meaning is constructed, identity is formed, and social life is established. Characters in films can engage in social interactions governed by cultural norms and languages through the Symbolic,

influencing how they communicate, behave, and form relationships. Once a person begins to communicate and use language to express himself, he enters the realm of the Symbolic. The influence of the Symbolic on identity is evident in the processes of language acquisition and subject formation. As an individual engages with the Symbolic through language, he defines himself by his connection to social markers and norms. In this sense, the Symbolic shapes an individual's subconscious and understanding of himself within a social context.

The last concept in Lacanian theory is the Real; it represents what lies beyond symbolization and language, embodying an unattainable and traumatic aspect of existence (May-Hobbs, 2023; Žižek, 2016). The Real involves original and unfiltered experiences, often linked to trauma and discomfort, which interfere with our understanding of reality. Within the Symbolic and Imaginary stages, the Real manifests as a space or absence in identity formation, frequently associated with traumatic experiences or fears that cannot be articulated verbally. This can impact identity by introducing elements of trauma that resurface in the Symbolic stages, creating disruptions in communication and meaning, and shaping the way individuals view themselves and their relationships with others (Ragland, 2015). In daily life, the Real can be seen in experiences that are not fully expressed through language or symbols. For example, the sense of loss when a loved one leaves or the feeling of sorrow that cannot be fully articulated through words. This feeling reflects an aspect of the Real, which cannot be accessed or understood in the conscious or unconscious mind and does not fall into the Imaginary and Symbolic categories.

The Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real interact and influence each other in the process of identity development. For example, traumatic experiences in the Real can disrupt the Symbolic and affect how an individual constructs their identity in the Imaginary. This interaction illustrates how each stage influences the other, creating a complex dynamic in the formation of human identity. Understanding of Lacan's three stages offers deeper insight into human psychological change and the impact of the social environment and emotions on identity formation.

To illustrate how Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real shape identity, the character of Nina Sayers from the film *Black Swan* (2010), portrayed by Natalie Portman can be an example (cf. Dogra, 2015; Stephenson, 2016). In the Imaginary realm, Nina is driven by the desire to embody the perfect ballerina—graceful, innocent, and flawless. She strongly identifies with the role of the White Swan, which symbolizes purity and control. Her self-image is fragile and idealized, heavily influenced by her overbearing mother and the strict standards of the ballet world. This realm is characterized by illusions and idealized images, and for Nina, it manifests in her constant self-scrutiny—both literally and metaphorically through mirrors—as she pursues an unattainable ideal of perfection.

As Nina enters the Symbolic order, she becomes immersed in the structured environment of the ballet company. Within this realm, she is tasked with portraying both the White Swan and the Black Swan—two roles that embody contrasting qualities. The Symbolic order presents her with the rules, expectations, and social identities that shape her existence: she is a daughter, a dancer, a rival, and a performer. This creates an internal struggle for Nina as she grapples with reconciling these roles, particularly the conflict between the White Swan's innocence and the Black Swan's sensuality. This tension reflects the larger clash between societal expectations and personal desires.

As Nina seeks to fully embody the Black Swan, the Real begins to intrude upon her reality. She starts to lose her grip, experiencing hallucinations, paranoia, and self-harm. The Real represents what cannot be symbolized or fully understood—raw experiences, trauma, and repressed desires. For Nina, the Real signifies the frightening disintegration of her carefully constructed identity. Her final performance becomes both a triumph and a collapse: she transforms into the Black Swan in a moment of breathtaking beauty, but this transformation comes at a devastating cost to her sanity and ultimately, her life.

Several studies have explored the personality and psychological issues experienced by characters in movies using a psychoanalytic approach. For example, Floriani (2023) analyzed psychoanalysis through Sigmund Freud's theory to examine the changes in the behavior of the main character, Mei, in the film *Turning Red*. The study investigates how anxiety influences Mei's actions and transformations, focusing on three types of anxiety identified by Freud: reality, moral, and neurotic anxiety. The findings indicate that Mei experiences all three anxieties, with reality anxiety being the most prevalent due to her fear of others' perceptions of her body transformation. The findings also highlight broader cultural themes, including the pressures of adolescence and the influence of cultural heritage on identity. Mei's transformation into a red panda symbolizes the challenges young people face when trying to balance their personal desires with familial expectations.

The other study was conducted by Masyhur et al. (2023), which investigated *the Batman* (2022) movie. Sigmund Freud's psychological theory, along with Stuart Hall's representation theory and Barbara Engler's personality theory, is used to reveal how characters navigate internal conflict and its impact on identity development. This analysis utilizes the character of Bruce Wayne to explore internal conflict by connecting to the deeper theme of identity formation and emphasizes that psychological struggles can shape and define one's sense of self. The researchers demonstrate through their analysis using the three theories that Bruce Wayne's internal conflict can be resolved, marking an important step in his identity formation. In other words, Bruce Wayne's identity formation is intricately linked to the internal conflicts he faces. These conflicts not only shape his self-perception but also influence

his actions and relationships, ultimately leading to a more complex and nuanced understanding of his character.

The results of the above studies have enhanced understanding of the psychoanalytic approach, particularly regarding how inner conflict, anxiety, and social pressure influence the formation of character identity in films. Through Freud's theory, studies such as those by Floriani (2023) and Masyhur et al. (2023) reveal the psychological dynamics embedded in the characters' narratives, enriching the understanding of unconscious structures, self-defense processes, and the relationship between trauma and behavior. These studies demonstrate that psychoanalysis is deeply connected to film analysis, especially in interpreting symbolism, internal motivation, and the impact of the social environment on character development.

However, these studies are generally motivated by psychoanalytic theories such as Freud and are prevalent in live-action films depicting adult characters. This presents an opportunity to further explore other types of media, such as animated films, and the need for additional psychoanalytic research, such as that of Jacques Lacan, which, in the researchers' view, offers a more complex understanding of identity formation through the orders of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. This approach has not yet been applied in the context of teen-themed animated films such as *Turning Red* (2022). Therefore, this research will fill the gap by applying Lacan's theory to analyze the identity formation of teenage characters in animated films while considering the influence of Asian culture as a significant element in the symbolic structure that shapes the main character's personality.

Jacques Lacan's concept regarding the personality can be used to explore the main character's identity development in the animated movie like *Turning Red* (2022) through psychoanalysis. Released in 2022, it is a teen animated film produced by Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation. The film highlights the importance of self-acceptance and authenticity. In the film, Meilin Lee, a 13 years old girl, transforms into a large red panda whenever she experiences strong emotions. She is confident and ambitious but also a perfectionist. Her close relationship with her mother results in her mother being protective of Meilin. One day, after waking from sleep, Meilin discovers she has turned into a big red panda. Panicked and confused about what has happened to her, she does not know how to cope. This transformation into a red panda is a curse inherited from her mother, who can also turn into a monstrous panda. To control the red panda, Mei must learn to manage her emotions and accept herself for who she is. Additionally, she must work with her mother to break the curse.

Several studies have explored the personalities and psychological issues of movie characters using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. For example, Shahwan (2019) analyzed Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* and found that Lacan's theory plays a significant role in psychoanalytic interpretation. The study revealed that

Lacanian concepts—such as the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—help uncover the psychological development of characters. In this analysis, the relationship between Santiago, the old man, and the marlin is examined through Lacanian ideas like the mirror stage and the dynamics of desire. The fishing line serves as a metaphor for dependence and the struggle for identity, reflecting Santiago's efforts to maintain his connection with the marlin. This interaction also illustrates the mirror stage, highlighting both his inner strength and vulnerability. The study concludes that identity formation is influenced not only by cultural and social contexts but also by personal experiences depicted in various forms of media, including animated films.

The other study was also conducted by Wirawan (2021), which analyzed how audiences interpret the film *Joker* (2019) and examined the implications for the perception of mental illness through Lacan's theory. The research emphasizes the importance of understanding the audience's perspective when analyzing films that address complex psychological themes, enabling viewers to gain a deeper understanding of mental health issues in society. Additionally, this research explores the application of Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on audience interpretation and providing an in-depth analysis of mental health themes in the context of the film *Joker*. In the study, the researcher describes the character of Arthur Fleck, who struggles with mental health before transforming into the Joker. This transformation highlights how the audience's misinterpretation of Arthur's character reflects society's stigma surrounding mental health. Many viewers perceive Arthur as a figure justifying violence rather than as an individual grappling with mental illness.

The previous studies have significantly contributed to the development of Lacan's theory, focusing on areas such as popular culture, audience interpretation analysis, and classic literature. While these findings demonstrate the effectiveness of Lacan's theory in analyzing key issues like identity, mental health, and social interaction through fictional media and popular culture, the present study aims to address the gap by applying Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to a film from an Asian cultural context. This approach provides new insights into how Symbolic and Imaginary constructs operate differently across cultures, particularly in adolescent identity formation.

Culture in the growth of identity serves as a framework that provides clues about norms, values and social roles to shape the way for individuals to understand themselves and behave according to social expectations (Leary & Tangney, 2012). The differences between Western and Asian cultures greatly affect the symbolic order. The individualistic Western culture emphasizes self-expression and personal freedom, while the collectivistic Asian culture emphasizes social balance and loyalty to family (Ding et al., 2024; Martin & Nakayama, 2022; Sadana, 2025). These differences in value structures directly affect the way individuals in each culture shape their self-image, control desires, and respond to social pressures.

In addition, animated films offer a unique opportunity as a medium for exploring identity in complex social and cultural contexts. Through elements such as color, character design, and exaggerated animation, they provide a rich and profound visual representation of internal conflicts, often emphasizing idealized imagery and fantasy, which are central to Lacan's theory. For example, characters grappling with internal conflicts allow for the creation of limitless visual symbols, enabling researchers to delve deeper into the human subconscious. However, culture also plays a role in shaping how identity is formed. In Asian cultures, internal conflict is often not expressed directly due to norms such as respect for honor or maintaining dignity, in contrast to Western cultures, which tend to be more open in expressing emotions and internal struggles (DeVito, 2016; Ding et al., 2024; Martin & Nakayama, 2022). Furthermore, animated films frequently portray universal themes—such as growth, family, and self-acceptance—in a manner that resonates across cultures. This makes animated films an ideal medium for exploring identity in a global social context.

As a response, the present research focuses on the animated film *Turning Red* (2022) as a cultural means of identity building, particularly for adolescent girls within the context of Asian culture. It offers a comprehensive understanding of how culture and family dynamics shape the main character's identity, specifically in relation to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. This approach not only applies Lacan's theory to animated media but also illustrates how Asian culture influences identity formation through the interaction of the imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How are Lacan's three psychoanalytic orders, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, represented through Mei's experiences in the *Turning Red* movie?
2. How do Lacan's stages of psychoanalysis, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, interact to shape Mei's identity development in the *Turning Red* movie?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach combined with content analysis to examine data through verbal interpretation rather than statistical analysis. The primary aim is to explore and interpret the meanings, symbols, and representations embedded within film narratives, thereby offering insights into thematic elements, emotional expressions, and cultural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Krippendorff, 2019). The analytical framework is grounded in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory—specifically his concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—which are used to investigate the identity formation of the protagonist in the animated film *Turning Red*. By integrating content analysis with a qualitative descriptive methodology, this research will not only uncover the psychological dimensions of the main character's

experiences but also provide a broader understanding of how identity is constructed within larger cultural and social frameworks.

This research focuses on the main character, Mei, a 13-year-old who has a strong bond with her family and culture, excels academically, and maintains loyal friendships. The supporting characters include her father, Jin Lee; her mother, Ming Lee; her best friends, Miriam, Priya, and Abby; her grandmother, Wu; her large extended family; and *4 Town*, Mei's favorite boy band. The analysis of these supporting characters will be limited to contexts that are closely related to Mei.

Data for this study were collected through multiple viewings of the film, during which key scenes were captured as screenshots to illustrate character development relevant to the research focus. These include factors influencing the protagonist's transformation, as well as objects that represent Lacan's psychoanalytic registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—and the emotional dimensions of the main character. Additionally, dialogues, monologues, facial expressions, and interactions involving both the protagonist and supporting characters were analyzed as part of the dataset.

Overall, there are fifty-two data units, including twenty-two dialogue excerpts, twenty-one visual scenes, and nine monologue excerpts that illustrate the main character's identity formation. The criteria for data selection encompass the main character's identity conflicts, family and personal expectations, illusions, fantasies, relationships with others, the social environment, and other relevant aspects related to the three stages of Lacanian identity formation: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

All the data, including selected key scenes such as the moment when Mei first sees herself as a red panda, were analyzed through the lens of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, specifically the stages of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Additionally, the roles of external influences, such as Mei's overprotective mother and her three close friends, were examined to understand their impact on her identity formation. The analysis is grounded in Lacanian theory and supported by scholarly sources, including journal articles, books, and other relevant literature aligned with the research focus.

In analyzing the qualitative data of this research, a content analysis model developed by Krippendorff (2019) was used, which consists of five main stages: Unitizing, Sampling, Coding, Inferring, and Narrating. The first stage, unitizing, was done by identifying and determining the unit of analysis in the form of words, phrases, or sentences such as dialogue, scenes, or relevant quotes in the film as the basis of analysis. Furthermore, sampling was done by selecting pieces of data that best represented the focus of the research, namely in the formation of the main character's identity. In the coding stage, the units that had been determined were categorized into certain themes based on the concept of Lacan's theory. This requires careful

planning, clear instructions, and a balance between mechanical processes and human interpretation to ensure that the analysis is meaningful. The coding process involves transcribing speech, describing observations, taking notes, interpreting messages, and assessing performances. After that, the inferring stage involves finding meaning and interpreting the relationships between categories, which are then used to answer the research problem. Finally, the narrating stage organizes all findings into a structured analytical narrative, presenting the results of the interpretation in a logical manner that clearly conveys the analysis results. The Krippendorff's content analysis model (2019) was selected for its ability to transform qualitative data into meaningful themes through a systematic and directed process.

To ensure the validity of the data, the researchers conducted an expert validation process with an English Literature lecturer from a private university in Malang. The data were organized in tables to facilitate the review process. During validation, the expert carefully examined the data and provided feedback, particularly regarding specific coding. The researchers then revised the data based on her suggestions and resubmitted it for further evaluation. This iterative process helped ensure that the final data were both accurate and reflective of the expert's input.

RESULTS

The Representation of Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Mei's Experiences in *Turning Red*

The Imaginary

The Imaginary stage in Lacan's theory is a phase where individuals begin to form their identity through the mirror stage, reflecting both the images of others and deep ideal representations. In the movie *Turning Red*, this imaginary stage is illustrated through Mei's self-perception as the ideal daughter, shaped by her mother's expectations and the personal fantasies she develops in secret. As a daughter, Mei is expected to be responsible, emotionally restrained, academically excellent, respectful of tradition, and loyal to her family, particularly her mother. Figures 1 and 2 below depict Mei's portrayal of herself as the ideal daughter.



Figure 1. Mei's ideal image achievement at school (00.07.09)



Figure 2. Mei performed temple duties (00.08.36)

Figures 1 and 2 above demonstrate how Mei actively shapes her self-image as the ideal child. She presents herself as a diligent student who participates in temple activities and refrains from causing trouble, all to meet her mother Ming's expectations. Mei portrays herself as part of a devoted family identity. This process aligns with the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary, which involves identification and reflection. These elements play a crucial role in the formation of the ego and sense of self, influenced by illusions, fantasies, and relationships with others.

The following dialogue indicates that Mei aims to maintain her image even in social interactions, as she expresses a preference for cleaning over going to karaoke with her friends.

Mei : ... it's cleaning day."

Miriam : "Mei, every day is cleaning day. Can't you just get one afternoon off?"

Mei : "But, I like cleaning (GASPS) plus, ...!"

The dialogue demonstrates that Mei's self-image is constrained by her parents' expectations, significantly impacting her identity. In the conversation between Mei and Miriam, it becomes clear that Mei feels trapped in her role as an obedient and diligent child. While she claims to enjoy cleaning, an underlying sense of dissatisfaction reveals that her constructed identity is not entirely authentic. This conflict between her personal desires and external expectations lies at the heart of the identity crisis Mei is facing. However, as shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5 below, another side of Mei emerges that contrasts with her self-image. She secretly draws Devon, the boy she likes, enjoys the band 4-Town, and begins to express desires that she had previously suppressed. This can lead to an identity crisis when individuals base their identity on an idealized image, as reality may not align with their fantasies.



Figure 3. Mei's fantasy about 4-Town (00.04.32)



Figure 4. Mei created romantic/fantasy images in a notebook (00.12.01)



Figure 5. The imagination of Mei and Devon (00.12.06)

Additionally, internal conflict begins to emerge, as depicted in Figure 6 and illustrated in the dialogue between Ming and Mei below, where Mei's mother discovers the picture Mei drew of Devon. Mei's shame and fear highlight the fragility of the identity she has worked so hard to maintain in front of her mother. She feels that this discovery could "destroy" her carefully constructed self-image. In this context, Mei's identity can be understood as a construction heavily influenced by her parents and social environment, making it difficult for her to find her true self. The tension that arises during this imaginary phase demonstrates that when individuals are not given the freedom to express themselves, they risk facing a profound identity crisis.



Figure 6. Mei's mother knew about the picture (00.12.22)

Ming : "Mei- Mei (Painting gasps). Do you want a snack?"

Meilin : "Cool, Great, Thanks. Don't look at the notebook, don't look at the notebook, don't. No!" (chuckles nervously)

In short, the movie *Turning Red* illustrates how reliance on external factors, particularly parents, can lead to significant internal conflict regarding identity. Mei, confined to an idealized image that does not fully represent her true self, experiences deep discomfort and dissatisfaction, reflecting the challenges many individuals face in their quest for personal identity.

The Symbolic

In the Symbolic stage, individuals begin to engage with social structures, including language, law, and cultural values that shape their identity. In the film *Turning Red*, this aspect is particularly pronounced, as Mei comes from a Chinese-Canadian family that places a strong emphasis on ancestry and honor.

In the film *Turning Red* (2022), the first symbolism emerges through family traditions and spiritual activities at the ancestral temple. Figures 7 and 8 below illustrate how Mei's identity is shaped by these cultural norms, emphasizing that every family, including Mei's, has the responsibility of caring for and preserving the temple as part of their cultural heritage and the values passed down through generations. According to Lacanian theory, this reflects the Symbolic stage that governs individuals through language, law, and inherited social values. The family's duty to maintain the shrine not

only signifies family honor but also represents social responsibility and a commitment to their cultural identity.



Figure 7. Family tradition at the temple (00.07.36)



Figure 8. Mei's family carried out temple duties (00.08.17)

The dialogue between Ming and Mei and Figure 9 below also illustrate that symbolism is expressed not only in rituals and traditions but also through narratives passed down through generations. In this context, the inherited ability to transform into a red panda, once viewed as a "gift," is now seen as a "curse" that must be contained. This shift highlights how symbolism is used to define aspects that conflict with cultural values and family honor, framing them as disturbances that need to be suppressed. The wild desires and emotions associated with the red panda's manifestation are viewed as threats that require control.

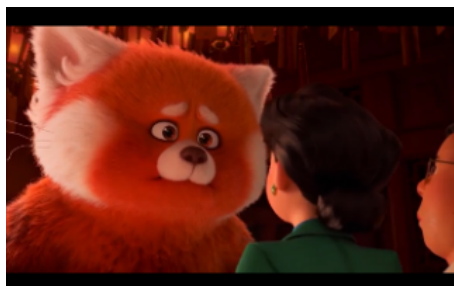


Figure 9. A conversation about panda as a curse (00.28.05)

Ming : "Su Yee passed this gift to her daughter, for when they come of age and they passed it to theirs. But overtime our family chose to come to a new world. And what was a blessing became an inconvenience."

Figures 10, 11, and 12 below illustrate that the symbolic meaning is also conveyed through the red panda sealing ritual performed by all descendants of the Mei family. This ritual can only occur during the red month of the Chinese calendar and is considered a sacred moment that allows the red panda to be removed from Mei's body. This tradition serves as a form of cultural and familial symbolism, aimed at managing the wild aspects of humanity that are viewed as socially inappropriate and inconsistent with the family's norms. By participating in this ritual, individuals are

expected to follow the Symbolic stages, suppressing desires and self-expression that could jeopardize the family's honor.



Figure 10. Preparation for sealing the red panda (01.06.50)



Figure 11. The red panda sealing ceremony (01.07.04)



Figure 12. The sealing ritual for Mei (01.07.41)

The pressure is evident, depicted in the dialogue between Mei's grandmother and aunt below, as the family pursues Mei, who has chosen to attend the concert instead of participating in the ritual. This choice symbolizes the strong familial pressure she faces, particularly as she rejects the norms and expectations imposed on her. By opting to escape the ritual and watch the *4-Town* concert, Mei actively challenges her family's symbolic structure. The family's reaction, especially Ming's anger and disappointment, highlights the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. The argument between Mei and her mother encapsulates this conflict, illustrating Mei's struggle to forge her identity while seeking to break free from an oppressive social order.

Grandma : "what did she say? keeping it?"

Lily : "Oh no. stop her! What are you doing?"

Helen : "Don't let her go!"

Grandma : "Stop! Get a hold of her."

Lily : "Don't do this!"

Therefore, at the end of Mei's statement, "I like boys! I like loud music! I like gyrating!" she expresses a desire to resist the social values imposed by her family. In a Lacanian context, this illustrates how the Symbolic shapes and constrains individuals through social and cultural rules and language.

In short, the movie *Turning Red* highlights the complex relationship between individual identity and the symbolic structures that influence their lives, along with the challenges that arise when personal desires clash with societal expectations. This struggle is a common experience for many teenagers as they navigate their identity formation.

The Real

The Real refers to a realm of experience that language and symbols can never fully capture. It encompasses trauma, unprocessed emotions, and uncontrollable chaos. Mei, who transforms into a red panda, embodies this realm, unveiling the deepest aspects of identity and trauma that remain inexpressible through words or symbols.

Figures 13 and 14 below illustrate the moment Mei realizes she has transformed into a red panda. Her exclamation, "I'm a monster!" highlights her confusion about the physical changes she has undergone. From a Lacanian perspective, this reaction represents a confrontation with the realm of the Real—an experience that disrupts her sense of identity and cannot be expressed within the existing symbolic framework.



Figure 13. Mei's first transformation into a red panda (00.16.34)



Figure 14. Mei was surprised by the change in herself (00.16.57)

In the following monologue, Mei's struggle to understand the change leads to trauma, causing her desires and fears to surface in unexpected and unsettling ways. Her transformation into a red panda symbolizes a shift in her reality, reflecting her internal pressures, anxiety, and repressed desires.

Mei: "what happening to me? I'm... I'm a monster!"

Figures 15 and 16 below depict the escalating conflict between Mei and her mother, Ming, as their emotions reach a breaking point. This argument illustrates the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, while also uncovering the trauma embedded in intergenerational relationships. Ming's transformation into a giant panda symbolizes the release of suppressed trauma and the overwhelming pressure that can no longer be contained, showing that reality often manifests as a disturbing and unforeseen experience.



Figure 15. Mei had a big fight with her mother (01.16.42)



Figure 16. Mei's resistance against her mother (01.16.32)

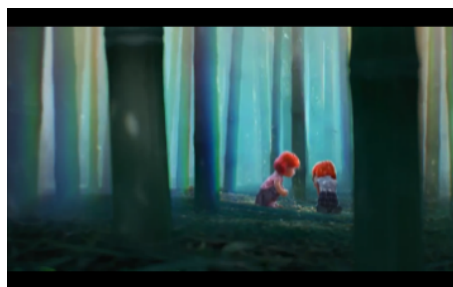
The dialogue between Mei and Ming below illustrates the conflict between Mei and Ming's egos, as both seek recognition and freedom. Mei insists on being acknowledged as an imperfect individual, while Ming strives to present an ideal family image. This clash allows reality to surface, revealing how Ming's unexpressed emotions and past experiences influence her interactions with Mei.

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 : "(GROWLS) Well, sorry I'm not perfect! Sorry I'm not good enough! And sorry I'll never be like you!"

Figure 17 and the dialogue between Mei and Ming below reveal the origins of Ming's trauma, stemming from the pressure to meet his family's expectations. When Ming admits that she once lost control of her red panda due to emotional strain, it highlights that reality is not solely an individual experience; it is also connected to the experiences of previous generations. This illustrates how trauma can be inherited, leading to psychological wounds that affect family relationships.



Mei : "Mom? Are you o"

Ming : "I'm sorry. It's al"

Mei : "what happened?"

Ming : "I...I hurt her"

Mei : "who?"

Ming : "I got so angry and I lost control. I'm just so sick of being perfect! I'm never gonna be good enough for her anyone"

Mei : "I know that way like, all the time. But... it isn't true"

Figures 18, 19, and 20, along with the dialogue between Mei and her mother below, illustrate a pivotal moment of resolution when Mei decides not to seal her red panda. This choice represents her acceptance of her other side and her emotions as integral parts of her identity. In a Lacanian context, this signifies a crucial stage in Mei's development, as she shifts from attempting to meet others' expectations to embracing her authentic self.

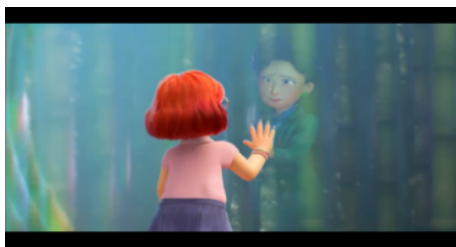


Figure 18. The decision to preserve the red panda (01.26.08)

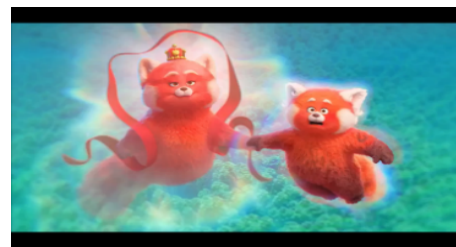


Figure 19. The red panda adoption (01.26.45)



Figure 20. The red panda is part of Mei herself (01.27.37)

Mei : "I'm finally figuring out. Who I am"

Ming : "You try to make everyone happy, but are so hard on yourself and if I taught you that, I'm sorry. So don't hold back for anyone. The farther you go, the prouder I'll be"

Thus, the analysis of the real aspect in the movie *Turning Red* illustrates the existence of an inner self within the individual. Mei's acceptance of this other side is a crucial step toward freeing herself from false images and oppressive norms. Consequently, she emerges as her true self, embracing her whole being, including her suppressed desires and emotions. The film depicts Mei's journey to discover her authentic identity, which involves not only challenging societal expectations but also recognizing the trauma and experiences passed down from previous generations.

The interaction of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in Shaping Mei Identity

Mei's life in developing her identity can be understood through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which highlights the complex interaction between three stages: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary plays a central role in the formation of Mei's identity, where the processes of identification and fantasy play a central role. Next, the Symbolic stage emerges when Mei is confronted with social rules and family norms, reflected in the tradition of sealing the red panda. This process marks an important transition in her identity journey. Finally, the emergence of the Real signifies the identity crisis Mei experiences, where she can no longer resolve her internal conflicts through existing social images and norms. Thus, these three stages are inseparable, mutually influencing and contributing to the formation of Mei's identity, creating a complex dynamic in her identity journey.

The main behavior driven by the Imaginary can be seen in the moment when Mei tries to be the "perfect child" according to her mother's expectations, while suppressing her personal desires as shown through the drawings she makes. In this context, Mei is driven not to show her unacknowledged desires, and her transformation into a red panda becomes a symbol of the tension between the ideal image she wants to present and her wilder instincts. This conflict becomes a driving force for the development of her identity, clearly evident in the scene where she first wakes up and realizes herself as a large red panda—a condition previously unimaginable, as shown in Figure 21. This transformation marks the beginning of Mei's identity growth and continues through the subsequent stages of Lacan's theory.



Figure 21. The first time Mei transformed into a red panda (00.16.37)

In the Symbolic stage, Mei's identity is influenced by social norms and the structures that govern individual identity. In this case, her identity is influenced by family traditions and social pressures. Mei, in this stage, continues the previous stage by hiding her red panda from others view, especially at school, as seen in figure 22. Mei's efforts to hide reflect the pressure to conform to others expectations. When her mother discovers her change, they plan to seal the red panda, reflecting how Mei's

identity is shaped and constrained by family norms and traditions, as shown in figure 23. In this context, Mei's identity is trapped within the symbolic system that governs her role and position, creating a conflict between personal desires and external demands.



Figure 22. Mei's day celebration at school (00.20.57)



Figure 23. Red panda sealing plan (00.29.01)



Figure 24. Rejecting ritual and preserving panda (01.10.11)



Figure 25. The beginning of the conflict with her mother (01.10.49)

In the growth of identity, the Real reflects aspects of identity that cannot be represented by images and norms. Mei must face the part of herself that cannot be limited. This can be seen in figure 24, where Mei rejects the sealing ritual and engages in a heated argument with her mother. Mei's rejection of the ritual shows her courage to accept the part of herself that cannot be represented by ideal images or social norms. Additionally, figure 25 shows the conflict with her mother symbolizing a crisis of identity, where Mei must confront and reconcile all aspects of herself. This signifies that her identity consists of complex and often conflicting elements. Thus, the interaction between the imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in the film *Turning Red* demonstrates how each stage contributes to the conflicts and resolutions Mei experiences, reflecting the journey of many teenagers in seeking and integrating their identities. The film emphasizes that identity is not static but an ongoing process shaped by personal interactions, social norms, and unrepresented realities.

DISCUSSION

In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the interaction between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real plays a significant role in shaping the identity of the main character in the film *Turning Red*. This study finds that each of these stages contributes meaningfully to the development of Mei's character, reflecting the desires and expectations of society. In *Turning Red*, Mei is caught in a state of transition between two contrasting cultures: the collectivist Chinese culture that prioritizes family honor and the individualistic, permissive, and expressive Western culture. These conflicting cultural values create a unique identity struggle for diaspora children (Kim et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2023).

Collectivism in Asian cultures emphasizes interdependence, respect for elders, social harmony, and role-based identity. Individuals are seen as part of a broader network, where personal decisions consider family and community expectations. Respect and duty toward parents and elders shape behavioral norms and reinforce hierarchical structures within families. Unlike Western individualism, which values self-expression, Asian cultures prioritize social harmony, viewing conflict as harmful to group cohesion (Ding et al., 2024; Martin & Nakayama, 2022; Sadana, 2025). Consequently, identity is usually shaped by fulfilling socially prescribed roles, such as being a dutiful child or a responsible community member, rather than by emphasizing unique personal traits. This relational understanding of self highlights the collective orientation in many Asian societies.

According to Lacan, as cited in Gornykh (2021), the conflict between family symbols and external social symbols pertains to the symbolic realm, which influences identity through laws, prohibitions, and social structures. In Mei's case, the Symbolic does not exist in isolation. At home, she is immersed in family symbolism that emphasizes obedience, the preservation of traditions, and following her mother's guidance. Conversely, outside the home, the symbolism of school and peer relationships encourages free expression and open affection. This dichotomy creates a split in Mei's identity, leading to internal conflicts that challenge her sense of self. As she attempts to embody both the "perfect child" at home and the "cool self" with her friends, she develops two distinct ideal versions of her ego.

This scenario aligns with Lacan's concept of the Imaginary, where the subject identifies with an idealized image reflected in a mirror yet remains disconnected from actual reality. Mei perceives herself as the ideal child in her mother's symbolic mirror while simultaneously embracing her identity as an energetic and free-spirited *4-Town* fan. This internal conflict results in psychological dissonance and considerable emotional strain. For instance, when Mei hides her red panda at school while also using it to gain popularity, it exemplifies her navigation of two self-images in different contexts. This strategy reflects the experiences of immigrant children in diaspora communities, who

often create dual identities to gain acceptance in conflicting value systems (Kim et al., 2018; Sugimura et al., 2021; Telzer, 2010).

The Symbolic plays a crucial role in identity formation within the Lacanian framework, where the gaze and the "other" serve as mirrors and sources of desire. In *Turning Red*, Mei's classmates, mothers, and the wider community embody the "other" that influences her longing for acceptance and recognition. However, her divergence from dominant cultural norms—both at home and in school—results in her experiencing alienation and a sense of isolation. This situation reflects the concept of diasporic subjectivity (Ang, 2001; Chow, 1993), where immigrant children often feel "not fully belonging anywhere," caught in a state of intermediacy. Their identities are shaped by external expectations that do not capture their authentic selves.

Through the symbol of the red panda, initially viewed as a curse, Mei finally discovers a way to reconcile her identity. Rather than "sealing off" her wild side, she embraces it as an integral part of her authentic self. This transformation exemplifies Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, which posits that diaspora subjects need not to choose a single identity; instead, they can create a third space where a new hybrid identity can emerge. In this context, the red panda transcends a mere metaphor for puberty, serving as a symbol of reconciliation between traditional norms and personal expression. Mei's decision to retain her panda affirms a hybrid identity that harmonizes rather than divides East and West, blending both into a new subject (Chande, 2024; Sugimura et al., 2021).

Mei lives in Canada's multicultural society, which complicates her identity formation. She faces pressure to adapt to the surrounding culture while also striving to uphold her family's cultural values. This dual pressure to preserve her cultural roots is a common challenge for immigrant children (Bridges et al., 2015). Mei's relationship with her mother reveals a shift in role dynamics. She is not only a child but also a representation of the cultural values her mother wishes to maintain. This conflict heightens psychological pressure and underscores the complexity of identity formation in immigrant families (Leung et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The present study examines Mei's character in the film *Turning Red* through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on her identity formation and the interplay between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Mei's development highlights the challenges teenagers face as they navigate personal desires alongside societal expectations. Her transformation into a red panda plays a crucial role in shaping her identity. The Imaginary aspect compels Mei to embody the ideal princess, illustrating the significant influence of parental expectations and social norms on her

self-image. The Symbolic dimension reveals her internal conflicts and the pressures of family rules regarding cultural traditions, while the Real is characterized by her rejection of the tradition of sealing the red panda. Mei's psychological journey in discovering her true identity illustrates the profound effects of family traditions, societal norms, and behaviors on her actions and relationships. Her struggle for self-acceptance highlights this theme, culminating in her embrace of her other self, the red panda.

This study contributes to the broader discourse analysis on animated films and psychoanalysis by demonstrating how teenage girls confront internal psychological conflicts influenced by idealized images. While this analysis primarily employs a Lacanian framework, future research could incorporate additional psychological perspectives to further explore how various animated films portray these psychological struggles. *Turning Red* movie is both entertaining and insightful, offering valuable perspectives on the complexities of identity formation. This study emphasizes the need for further exploration of identity within a cultural context, particularly through psychoanalysis, to deepen our understanding of contemporary human experiences. Mei's character serves as an intriguing case study, highlighting her connection to family and societal expectations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

AUTHOR (S) CONTRIBUTION

Dewanti, E.: Conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), writing –original draft (lead), reviews (supporting). Rusfandi, R.: Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), writing – original draft (supporting), review (lead), editing (lead). Sari, N.: Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), writing – original draft (supporting), review (supporting), editing (supporting).

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