

Love in Shadow: The Narrative of East Asian Mother-Daughter Relationship in Contemporary Films

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Abstract. The value and morality that dominated East Asian societies for centuries have forged a unique and oriental-featured mother-and-daughter relationship. This relationship explains how the parent and domestic relations within the basic structure of an Asian family have finally become an unbearable burden for the daughter. The case study on the two films' figure settings and their narratives further demonstrates how the virtue of filial piety alongside other traditional values is working on the reproduction of the mother-and-daughter relationship for modern families. The most typical example is the unconditional sacrifice of parents for their children and the unconditional obedience of children to their parents after receiving these profits. To regulate this long-term relationship between parents and children, Confucianism uses "filial piety" to restrain and regulate. It is argued that in East Asian societies, thousands of years of cultural underpinnings have caused women to grow up with much confinement and pain. The stubbornly patriarchal social system behind human beings is the root of the problem.

Keywords: East Asian; mother and daughter relationship; filial piety.

1. Introduction

Confucianism has dominated eastern societies for thousands of years, and the concept of "Family, Country, and The World" is implanted in the blood of East Asians [1, 2]. By default, "family" is the most basic unit of traditional society. In Confucian culture, family construction is formed by the tied-up of the implicit profit [3, 4]. The most typical example is the unconditional sacrifice of parents for their children and the unconditional obedience of children to their parents after receiving these profits. In order to regulate this long-term relationship between parents and children, Confucianism uses "filial piety" to restrain and regulate. The phrase "Of all the virtues, filial piety comes the first" makes the relationship between East Asian parents and children less about sincere communication and more about hierarchy and rigid agreement [5]. In such a system, the exposure of emotions becomes a matter of shame. East Asian families rarely talk about "love" internally, whether parents or children subconsciously take love out of the discussion. For example, it is common for East Asian children to hear from their parents, as if copying and pasting, "we are doing this for your benefit." This sentence is typical of the implicit profit relationship. Instead of saying, "we love you," they say, "for your benefit." However, the criteria for right and wrong are defined based on the parents' traumatic/regrettable and gratifying/privileged experiences, their upbringing, what their parents did, and the demands of society. When we break the sentence down, only the subject "we" have characteristics and reasons. At the same time, the object "you" can be any person replaceable.

Further, the effect of such subjective assumptions is that the child's perception of happiness is out of control. When the universal consensus of happiness is achieved, the child is crowned as the "Chosen One" because it is a "you should be happy" standard. Nevertheless, humans are born different, so they have different needs. Children's honest physical feedback screams, "I am not happy/fulfilled," but their reason convinces them that they should be content. This contradiction can take away the ability to adjust happiness scales at any turn. Children will gradually begin to question what happiness is. And then they will start to doubt themselves, "Is it all my fault?" This mental result is the typical

downside of all the strong making subjective choices for the weak. It is also true for the position of men and women. For example, numerous men cannot understand why housewives are still unsatisfied when they do not have to work on anything. The dilemma that can be ignored by men who are the power holder is that the need for self-fulfillment as women cannot be fulfilled. In any situation, there is no solution to the structure that only the weak side reflects on.

In this controlling family mode, the power structures shaped by gender push mothers and daughters into an inescapable dilemma. American sociologist Nancy Chodorow argues that the experience of becoming a mother involves a double identity for a woman [6]. The woman identifies with her mother, and through the identification with her child, she re-experiences herself as a child in care. Deutsch notes, "In relation to her own child, a woman repeats her mother-child history [6]. "So for the daughter, identification with her mother and motherhood is closely connected to her identity as a woman. Thus, Chodorow infers that a woman's identification with a female child may be stronger [6]. However, this connection does not make them better cooperative partners. Mothers in East Asian families do not hold real family power. In the face of husbands and sons who are gender privileged in their social positioning, daughters are the only way for mothers to establish privilege in the home. The social shackles and empiricism that come with the same gender allow mothers to treat their daughters as if they were their second life. At an early age, daughters are instructed by their mothers to be "like girls," for example, to be reserved, gentle, and well-behaved. As daughters grow up, their mothers' expectations demand that they become "sons with women's faces." It seems that the gender gap has been narrowed, but it adds another value for the daughters to pursue in their lives. Daughters need to achieve their value as selves and the value given by others (patriarchal society). The daughter who receives this conflicting dual message cannot help but fall into a state of division. Then a battle often breaks out between them, where the young person normally wins. However, her victory is tinged with negligence because mere the mother's presence turns her into a sinner. It is not until the daughter reaches adulthood that, with distance and time, a relatively peaceful relationship can be established between them. However, the daughter is eternally disappointed, and the mother often perceives herself to be chased by the nightmare.

2. Two Films for East Asian Mother-Daughter Relationship

As Edward Said's famous concept of Orientalism shows, the Orient is only an imaginary shadow in many contexts [7]. The Eastern world is constructed as heterogeneous, divided, and othered. It exists as "they" (they-East) in opposition to "us" (us-West). The East is defined, watched, portrayed, challenged, and worshipped, but not spoken for itself. The media industry, represented by film and television series, is an effective practice for contemporary Eastern artists to have a voice in a world dominated by Western contexts. The earliest was Ang Lee's "Family Trilogy" in the 1990s, which brought out the internal landscape of the closed Eastern family. The conflict of intergenerational values in *Pushing Hands*, the suppression of filial piety in *The Wedding Banquet*, and the father-daughter divide in *Eat Drink Man Woman*. The films discussing East Asian mother-daughter relationships from the *Joy Luck Club* to *Saving Face*, as if the conflict between the two is always "I'm never good enough for you." This theme has been repeated over and over again for decades, yet it still resonates.

In March 2022, two films were released that coincidentally explored mother-daughter relationships in Asian immigrant families. One is *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. The other is Pixar's 3D animated film *Turning Red*, directed by Domee Shi. These two films have very different visual styles. *Turning Red* is more of a colorful fairy tale than the absurdity and R-rated of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. However, both films focus on the emotional connection between an East Asian mother-daughter relationship in their core content and cultural presentation. They also bring the audience to explore the moral and identity reasons behind it. The success of these two films is a breakthrough for East Asian women's films in the international market. They have opened the eyes of a broader audience to the living conditions and

emotional make-up of women in the Eastern world. They have also drawn more attention to the identity dilemmas of immigrant groups.

3. Comparison of Everything Everywhere All at Once & Turning Red

The Symbol of Emotional Outbursts is the core method both two movies employed to convey the expression of women. In 5,000-year-old East Asian traditional culture, people believe endurance and restraint are noble characteristics [8]. That straightforwardness and exposure have always been an actual cause for harmed dignity [9]. With such a confined mind, extreme emotions such as anger, anxiety, love, and possessiveness become the cause of the last straw that breaks the camel's back. In the process of Asian children growing up, every moment of suppressing emotions that have no way to explode is a pump of air to the balloon. The balloon has an elastic limit, and people are the same. So when the day finally comes, and the first crack in the flesh appears, it is not far from the explosion. In *Turning Red*, Mei's transformation into a red panda is precipitated by an extreme emotional outburst. A thirteen-year-old girl, for the first time, has her first menses. From then on, whenever Mei felt a solid emotional wave, she would suddenly turn into a giant red panda. This time, the panda's appearance becomes a symbol representing her inner self - the desire to explore sexuality and her true self as a woman. In the movie, this fantasy setting is actually applied to all the women in the family. It might be explained that such depressing and painful emotions that almost every East Asian woman must experience. Same in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Joy's mood turns into a rotten, black bagel. It is a symbol of nihilism. Whenever Joy cannot regulate herself because of the pressure from her mother and family, she stuffs a piece of pain into this bagel. When her body "explodes", she completely transforms into a Jobu Tupaki whom her mother cannot trap. In contrast, Joy's berries are more desperate and painful than Mei's, like an accumulation of disappointments. Mei is accompanied by her mom from the very beginning when she turns into a red panda, but Joy's breakdown is woven into the darkness of her growth. She travels lonely in countless universes, trying to find a universe in which her mother sincerely loves her. Over the course of multiverse trips, Joy directly realized the absence of all kinds of boundaries. And so she naturally accepts the chaos and disorder of life. When Joy has seen and experienced many of her lives, so one life doesn't matter. This bagel is the black hole created by the collision between East Asian tradition and modernity. The daughters' age allows them to see the more expansive sky, but when they turn around, they cannot escape the chains of their mother. They feared the vast sky ahead and repelled the rotten box. And then, like Joy, despair to the point where love and hate have no meaning and just want to end.

For this emotional repression, the similar family setting portrayed in the film is one of the reasons for its formation. In both films, we have a soft father figure. In both Jin (*Turning Red*) and Waymond (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*), the father seems to be the role that the mother suppresses. They are often dependent individuals, timid and indecisive, and thus become "another child to take care of" for these busy and brilliant mothers. Even though they seem to release the right to speech, they still take on the role of the mentor for the story. Waymond, for example, eventually moves Evelyn to understand the meaning of life and gives up walking into the bagels with her daughter. Moreover, Jin makes Mei feel the power of love and support. It cannot be denied that such a setup is a trend in East Asian families, but it still seems like a conjecture from a Western perspective. In the contemporary Eastern world, especially in East Asian families, the father is still the privileged and sovereign party. The mother is indeed exhausted by her family and life. However, the silence and disappearance of the father are the status quo. It can also be explained in the way that because both films focus on the mother-daughter relationship in the family, it is understandable that the father is portrayed as a supporting character.

As mentioned above, traditional East Asian conservative thinking has many inhibitions for women. As the world develops and the internet evolves, children are destined to grow up with different insights and values than their parents. In *Turning Red*, the most significant conflict between Ming and Mei as mother and daughter is Mei's desire for love. Whether it is Mei's drawing of her secret-

love Devon, or her passion for Pixie band 4 Town, she has been doing her best to hide it. In her mother's eyes, she was always a good girl and should be reserved and conservative. Mei sells pictures of herself as a red panda to save money for concert tickets, which becomes a great shame in Ming's eyes. This emotion finally explodes into an angry question: "How can you do that to your mother?" Ming's questioning leads to the fact that what the mother cannot tolerate is that her daughter identifies herself as another person. What a mother hates the most is friends who help her daughter resist her family's oppression. She will ban her from seeing them often, and even criticizes the pretext of "bad influence." For instance, the first thing Ming did when she found out about her daughter's drawings was that a boy was cheating; the first thing she did when she found out that her daughter was earning money through Red Panda was to blame her friends; and also saying that boy groups are for bad boys. This blame is the privileges that Ming takes for granted after giving everything to her daughter as a mother.

Suppose Mei's choice is a level 5 violation in traditional East Asian culture. In that case, Joy is coming out to her mother as a level 10 typhoon. Evelyn thought of herself as a very enlightened mother. Still, she could not open up to her father about it. It dawned on her when she first met Jobu Tupaki to curse that Jobu Tupaki from other universes caused her daughter's mistake. In her mind, it was still the wrong path. She cannot understand and accept this, but perhaps the more significant reason is that if Joy's future is constantly ridiculed, she will think it is her own fault. She cannot accept the fact that she has given her all but needs to repent. Not only that, but such reasons also led her to keep complaining about Joy's obesity. She could not accept that her contribution was an empty one. Mothers in East Asian cultures are full of control because they do not get the family's rights. The patriarchal society only recognizes the man as the "head of the family," and the family's social activities as a unit are all dependent on the social role of the male master. As a result, all the values of mothers' lives are enclosed in family relationships, and they inevitably place all their "fulfillment" and "emotional dependence" on their children. They are "superheroes" in household chores and "control freaks" in emotions.

Mother's reconciliation with herself is the part of the theme that helps analyze this relationship more deeply. Mothers are always like master keys in the views of the public. They seem to have superpowers and can solve all problems. However, mothers do not suddenly become like that. They were once confused little girls too. Both films take the audience back to the stories of Ming (*Turning Red*) and Evelyn (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*) before they become mothers. This script arrangement is one of the significant reasons these two films are so successful. They are not just focusing on the mother-daughter conflict but extending the characters' story to a deeper level and making the whole story more multi-dimensional and more justifiable. In Ming's story, she panicked when she realized she would turn into a red panda. In her formative years, she felt anxiety and pain because she could never live up to her mother's expectations. She mistakenly hurt her mother when she turned into a red panda out of anger. These scars stayed with Ming as she grew up until she eventually became a girl's mother as time progressed. She cannot help but be harsh to Mei according to her past, and finally becomes the mother who had been the most painful for her. In the illusion, the fragile young girl Ming appears. Ultimately, her mother's comfort and embrace become the key to unlocking the chains that bind her. Evelyn's story carries an even heavier cultural burden. In her twenties, Evelyn chooses to leave her home for love, leaving Hong Kong for America, the strange land. Evelyn's father (Gong Gong) is a standard and typical father in patriarchal East Asian societies. He threatened Evelyn never to contact him again if she left home. Decades passed, his attitude changed, and our story begins with Gong Gong's 70th birthday. Evelyn's father was like a mountain of incommunicability as she grew. The break with her family made Evelyn a drifting person. The scars in her heart made her passive and painful as the days became harder and harder, and also later as she became a mother. Mothers always do not want their daughters to go through the same pain, so they will not give up on Joy no matter what. However, she did not know that such thoughts make love more and more suffocating.

4. How Western feminism dissects mothers' jealousy of their daughters

Simone de Beauvoir, an early founder of feminism, refers to a mother's feelings about her daughter in her book *The Second Sex*: "She is doubly jealous: of the world that takes her daughter, and of her daughter who, in conquering part of the world, robs her of it" [10]. This perspective is difficult to expose bluntly in an East Asian relationship system. Women need to be satisfied by the value they acquire, and the value society gives them. However, as mothers are wrapped up in the responsibilities demanded by society, they dedicate their lives to playing the role of someone's mother, wife, and daughter. So that share of squashed self-actualization is projected onto their daughters. They use selfless devotion as a bargaining chip to take over the dominance of their daughters' lives. This devotion will eventually make the mother give up herself entirely and make her daughter's happiness the only answer to her life. However, this is a high-risk gamble. They will not see it as their mother's supreme gift but instead become angry and resistant. In the mother's eyes, this is a betrayal of herself. They develop an aversion to their gender as they grow up. As the creator, the child, who is also female, becomes her double. Thus, the girl must experience the loss she has to bear before becoming a "woman". But at the same time, they do not allow their daughters to be identical to themselves because they want their "rebirth" to be a second way out through experience. She has carefully designed this future, and her daughter's will to escape is sure to hit her hard. She hated everything that attracted her daughter to leave, such as her friends, teachers, admirers, hobbies, idols, and opportunities. The mother stigmatizes these things that "spoil their relationship" and forcibly tears her daughter away from them. Nevertheless, as the daughter grows, she develops more and more self-awareness to break free from her mother's control. This breakout triggers the mother's anger. If this happens to the son, they can quickly forgive because sons are born as males with the privilege to pursue freedom. The daughter, however, is the opposite. As a woman, what gives her the right to have rights she does not have? This brokenness exposes all the values the mother sacrificed as false and unacceptable to her.

5. Conclusion

The bond between mother and daughter is very delicate. Especially in East Asian societies, thousands of years of cultural underpinnings have caused women to grow up with much confinement and pain. Daughters who grow up in this repressive environment will one day become mothers. They cannot help but project their selfish desires onto their daughters and demand love from this blood partner. Mothers always hope their girls will complete their unfinished escape through their own experiences. However, when the daughters finally achieve separation from their mothers, the mothers have mixed feelings. They become controlling and protective of youngsters of the same gender that is not privileged in society. So the mother keeps repeating the trope, tying her daughters tighter and tighter. Nevertheless, the daughter is always the one who knows her mother best. This conflict between the ego and the mother will gradually lead them to the abyss of misery, becoming daughters who will always blame themselves. However, as people explore this relationship hidden in the shadows, they have to realize that a hysterical mother does not cause everything. The stubbornly patriarchal social system behind human beings is the root of the problem.

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