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**INTERGENERATIONAL AMBIVALENCE AND NEGOTIATIONS:  
MALAYSIAN CHINESE FAMILY DYNAMICS IN THE FILM *THE  
JOURNEY***

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**ABSTRACT**

*The millennium saw the emergence of a number of key feature films produced by Malaysian producers-directors of Chinese ethnicity. Such Malaysian Chinese films comprise a majority of ethnic Chinese as lead actors, who converse predominantly in the Chinese language, and consist of narratives that focus on the experiences of the Chinese community in Malaysia. This paper seeks to analyse one of such films, 'The Journey', directed by Chiu Keng Guan in 2014. In particular, through the film's narrative, it aims to explore the extent to which this film visualises the possibilities of intergenerational negotiation and engagement as well as the implied issues of intergenerational and cultural differences. Using a conceptual framework that incorporates selected Confucian virtues, namely filial piety, benevolence and propriety, the discussion highlights the significant moments of intergenerational dialogue and engagements within the domestic context of a family. It concludes that the film provides a significant space to reflect on Malaysian Chinese intergenerational reciprocity through the negotiation of cultural differences between older and younger family members in the form of meaningful dialogue and engagement that lead to the realization of Confucian ideals of intergenerational harmony intertwined with conjugality.*

**Keywords:** Malaysian Chinese films, Confucianism, intergenerational, transnational, negotiation

**INTRODUCTION**

With the emergence of greater representation of Malaysian Chinese families in feature films in the last decade, it is timely to study the possibilities of intergenerational negotiation and engagement through the visual narratives, and to tease out issues of generational and cultural differences that enshroud Chinese

families in Malaysia. Knowledge of distinct generational perspectives and socio-cultural differences will provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of relationships that permeate living together as a family, which inevitably is marked by an interweaving of generations. Thus, this paper aims to explore the ways a selected Malaysian Chinese family film – *The Journey* (2014) – visually represents the possibilities of intergenerational negotiations and engagements. A brief overview of the Malaysian Chinese community will be helpful to form the contextual basis for the analysis.

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA**

According to the most recent census figures of 2021, Malaysian Chinese make up 22.6% of a total Malaysian population of 32.75 million citizens (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal). The Chinese form the second largest ethnic group among Malaysians, and make up a major sector of the global Chinese diaspora (Statista). With ancestral origins in South-eastern China, Malaysian Chinese are descendants of sojourners who travelled to Southeast Asia from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries in pursuit of economic gain (Wang, 2000: 48). Post-World War II, Malaysia has become the homeland for the descendants of the early Chinese sojourners who are born outside China, as they take on Malaysian citizenship in 1957. Today, the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia stretches beyond the fifth or sixth generation and have come to be known as Malaysian Chinese.

Tong Chee Kiong (2010: 101) explains that ethnic identity of the Chinese in Malaysia must be understood from both a macro and micro perspective. At the macro level, an understanding of Malaysian Chinese ethnic identity incorporates the influence of the state and the historical and socio-political context of a multi-ethnic Malaysian society. Tong further states that “most studies on ethnic relations in Malaysia tend to focus on the macro level” (2010: 101) and such studies have the tendency of presenting a homogenised and essentialised Malaysian Chinese identity.

On the other hand, at the individual or micro level, the subjectivities or heterogeneity of Malaysian Chinese identities emerge. As social actors, Malaysian Chinese expression of identities become more instrumental, multiple and negotiable (Tong, 2010: 107) as they navigate everyday realities. In the private space of the family, ethnicity is manifested expressively to meet personal social and emotional needs, whereby cultural identity operates at the personal level and is utilised at the familial level for purposes of familial cohesion.

To reiterate, Malaysian Chinese identity is far from a monolithic one as often come across through state sanctioned and political discourses. Tan Chee-Beng

(1997: 103) elaborates on the complexities of the Malaysian Chinese identity by explaining that the Chinese in Malaysia are further divided into various sub-ethnic identities as distinguished by their respective dialect or speech-groups such as Cantonese, Hailam, Hakka, Hokkien, Hokchiu, Kongsai, Henhua to name a few (Tan, 1997: 103). Mandarin remains the common language amongst the Chinese as it is the medium of instruction in Chinese education in Malaysia.

Additionally, Tan points out a unique sub-ethnic Chinese identity that is the Baba-Nyonya subgroup (1997: 105). Baba-Nyonyas are the product of Chinese cultural localisation of early Chinese immigrants into Malaya due to prolonged direct interaction with the indigenous Malays between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Baba-Nyonya identity, a culturally localised Chinese identity that speaks Malay as their mother tongue, can be further categorised into Melaka Baba, Penang Baba and Kelantan and Terengganu Peranakan type Baba. As Tong states, “the Chinese in Malaysia are actually culturally diverse, and fall into a continuum from the most localised to the least culturally localised” (2010: 102).

Malaysian Chineseness, an incorporation of the diasporic hyphenated identity, is both a bounded and unbounded identity. Tan’s notion of a “bounded and unbounded” nature of Malaysian Chinese identity refers simultaneously to a deterritorialized, unbounded Chinese ethnicity that is best observed in the transnational context of a global Chinese diaspora, and a territorialised, bounded Chinese identity that is tied to their identification with the Malaysian nation (1997: 115). To understand the variegated presentations of ethnic identity, the concept of positions is important. This paper seeks to argue that the forms of expression of the Malaysian Chinese cultural practices is negotiable and flexible from one generation to another.

It is undeniable that the political system in Malaysia is inherently Malay dominated, and is reflective of the demographic makeup of the country that comprise a Malay majority of 69.6% of the population as at third quarter 2021 (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal). Malaysia drew on the historical tradition of the Malay rulers as constitutional monarch, the national culture based on Malay indigenous civilization and Islam as the official religion, with the freedom to practice other religions. Indians are the other significant ethnic group that make up multicultural Malaysia.

Points of engagement with the ethnonational landscape is inevitable for macro level studies on ethnic relations as transactions and negotiations with other ethnic groups in the nation is presupposed. As such, information on the ethnonational composition of the country is useful for macro level analysis of ethnic relations and identity in Malaysia. The focus of this study, however, is at the micro or individual level, whereby points of engagement with the ethnonational landscape

is de-emphasised. Throughout the film, the focus is on the representations of the Chinese communities in the Chinese village settings. Furthermore, this paper's analysis centres on the private realm of the family, wherein moments of intergenerational engagement and negotiation between family members are analysed.

### **MALAYSIAN CHINESENESS AS REPRESENTED IN *THE JOURNEY***

*The Journey* is a Malaysian Chinese cinematic production wherein all the major characters are of Chinese ethnicity; save for one Englishman who, as the protagonist's fiancé, will introduce a transnational angle into the analysis, and one Malay woman who, as the classmate of the protagonist's father, is capable of conversing in basic Mandarin. The conversations are conducted in a variety of Chinese dialects as a form of code switching. When the other conversing character is the Englishman or the Malay woman, the conversations will contain an intermix of Chinese, English and Malay language.

Wang, Changsong and Chen, Yiming (2017) argue that as social subjects, Malaysian Chinese people actively construct meanings of their cultural identity by constantly having regard to their specific 'positionality' within their system of representation. Wang and Chen go on to conclude that "the film successfully demonstrates the negotiation of the colonial legacies of racialization" (2017: 3078).

In contradistinction to the above deductions, this paper contends that rather than a portrayal of multiculturalism and interethnic engagement, *The Journey* remains primarily focussed on Chineseness and points of engagement with the ethnonational landscape is minimal – all the major characters, save for one, is of Chinese descent. Further, the various localities and backdrops that make up the setting of the film are also highly Chinese centric as represented by the imageries of temples, Chinese lanterns and Chinese characters that adorn the houses and buildings. As quoted by Wang and Chen, the producer himself expressed that the film "is based upon a typical Chinese perspective" (2017: 3077). Therefore, this paper contends that as much as the ethnonational composition is multi-ethnic, *The Journey* centres on a particular generation of the Malaysian Chinese community whose values and culture are very much rooted in Chineseness.

Chinese identity is deeply rooted in the Confucian tradition. Any intellectual discourse on China's early culture, dating as far back as 2500 years ago, leads to a set of cultural and moral values expounded by one of China's greatest philosophers, Confucius. Confucian cultural and moral teachings have been most influential in shaping behaviour, belief patterns and the collective consciousness

of Chinese people to varying degrees, including its diaspora in Malaysia, as well as structures of Chinese families and communities. Corollary to the above, this paper argues that the Confucian paradigm is a suitable conceptual framework to analyse the film under study.

In terms of cinematic representations of the Malaysian Chinese community, it is only in this new millennium that Malaysian Chinese feature films started emerging. For the purposes of this article, 'Malaysian Chinese films' are feature films produced by ethnically Chinese Malaysian filmmakers or directors that comprise a majority of ethnically Chinese characters as lead actors who converse predominantly in the Chinese language, and which narratives tell stories of the experiences of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

The advent of digital video technology in 2000, coupled with an environment of rapid economic and cultural liberalization, gave rise to the emergence of Malaysian Chinese films. Such films represent, in visual forms, a continuum of the cultural trajectory of the Malaysian Chinese community into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unlike their forefathers, the cultural identities of subsequent generations of Malaysian Chinese did not depend on whether they could read or write Chinese or perform Chinese cultural practices; in a modern and multicultural post-colonial Malaysia, a variety of other cultural expressions of being Chinese were possible and legitimate, thereby establishing alternate ways of articulating their cultural values. Through Malaysian Chinese cinema, a post-colonial generation of Malaysian Chinese filmmakers turn to the audio-visual medium to articulate their desires, dreams and aspirations as they continually reconstruct an ethnic and cultural spectrum in their different stages of belonging in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysia.

Although cultural identity can be effectively imparted at the home and also through state institutions, it is within the home that one begins to learn about socio-cultural norms. On this basis, insights could be revealed from examining the processes of cultural negotiations from an intergenerational familial perspective. Using a conceptual framework that incorporates three selected Confucian virtues, this paper seeks to explore the evolving interpretations of these Confucian virtues as portrayed in the film, *The Journey*.

Also, this paper aims to reveal aspects where the film constitutes a space to reflect on significant moments of intergenerational dialogue and ambivalence, where negotiation of cultural differences between older and younger family members lead to intergenerational reciprocity and a reinterpretation of the three Confucian virtues. The following section briefly provides a background of Confucian philosophical thought and discusses its influence on the Malaysian

Chinese psyche, focussing on the three specific Confucian virtues of benevolence, filial piety and propriety that will be applied to analyse the film.

## **CONFUCIAN FRAMEWORK AS BASIS OF CHINESE TRADITION**

Confucianism is a long-standing tradition that has greatly influenced the processes of civilisation in China for over 2,500 years. Through the process of dispersion and migration, Confucianism has been an integral part of East Asian societies of Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia (Tu, 2000, 196).

While a relatively small number of people might identify as “Confucian”, Confucianism’s cultural reach is far broader. It is estimated to have some form of influence over the lives of more than 1.6 billion individuals – or 18 percent of the world’s population – living predominantly in China, as well as in the Korean peninsula, Japan, and in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia (Shah, 2019). Like other discourse of tradition, Confucianism is invoked as the rational basis of Chinese tradition, and is a set of ethical values that make up part of the cultural heritage of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora. It can be argued that the precepts of Confucianism have pervaded the consciousness of the different generations of the Malaysian Chinese community to varying degrees.

Malaysian Chinese who became citizens had been more willing to adapt their cultural practices in ways that would not offend the hegemonic culture of the local society. It is in the domestic domain that Malaysian Chinese people hold much autonomy in their cultural assertions. The social setting of the family plays an important function in the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity through the celebration of traditions and rituals as well as through intergenerational influence of cultural values and morals. Hence, the suitability to examine cultural negotiations and accommodations from an intergenerational family setting. Within the family, each generation experiences life differently due to their varied social and temporal experiences. Owing to the impact of changing and different socio-cultural environments, intergenerational studies have brought forth the notion that the (re)construction of identity between generations is an ongoing process whereby certain aspects of traditional culture are preserved while others are reinvented or discarded (Alba and Nee, 1999; Nagel, 1994).

Confucian thought holds true that the instructive and transformative power of ceremonies is subtle through the observance of rites and rituals of ceremony. The practice of rites and rituals stop depravity before it takes form. Rites and rituals in ceremonies of marriage or the rites of mourning are instituted to subconsciously

move people towards what is good and keep away from guilt (Legge, Chai and Winberg, 1967: 340).

The key teachings of Confucian philosophy focus on interpersonal obligations and particular individual roles and duties (Hwang, 1998). On this basis, this paper specifically focuses on three virtues highly valued in Confucian ideology that most aptly support the maintenance of harmonious familial and social relations as well as the proper observance of the rites and rituals surrounding the ceremony of marriage: benevolence (*ren*), filial piety (*xiao*) and propriety (*li*).

**Benevolence (*Ren*)** – Benevolence and love lies at the core of Chinese Confucian cultural ideals. Benevolence is different from a general humanitarian love for everybody – it starts from one's home and family. In contrast to the western concept of individual liberty and autonomy as exalted by John Stuart Mill, Confucian liberalism envisages humans as relational beings inseparable from the community to which they belong. In Confucian tradition, as a counter measure to liberalism's excessive emphasis on individual entitlements, virtues such as reciprocity, benevolence and modesty are promoted.

**Filial piety (*Xiao*)** – Known as family reverence, filial piety, which translates into loving, respecting and honouring one's parents, features strongly in Confucian culture. Filial piety is a core tenet of Confucian parent-child relationships. As Chen Lai (2018: 103) states, "Filial piety is the cherishing of, and repaying of affection to, one's parents". Filial piety can also be the feeling of responsibility and expression of gratitude to make good the pains that parents took for their child. This Chinese cultural heritage has persisted over historical time and is fundamental in its function of maintaining family obligations. Family obligation is an enduring characteristic of Chinese social structure, legitimated and rationalised in Confucian thought and demonstrated as 'filial piety' to parental authority (Fei, 1992; King, 1985). The concept of filial piety is multi-layered in that it comprises a range of virtues such as moral obligation, respect towards the elders of the family and fraternal deference.

**Propriety (*Li*)** – Propriety defines the boundaries of proper behaviour, provides opportunities for fulfilling personal desires within these boundaries and encourages the development of a noble character that embodies communal concerns (Ni, 2002). This virtue encompasses proper behaviour in the social sense, and also ritual propriety, social order and self-cultivation. In its application, propriety involves one's unique position in the social web whereby one's action is positioned in relation to others. When taken in the context of social relationships, age becomes a critical factor in establishing relative orientations. This means that older persons have different social expectations about how to behave and what to expect from their younger counterparts, and



vice versa. Orienting oneself in the context of a specific social web is important in the performance of propriety. However, the authority of the older is neither absolute nor isolated.

One way to encounter intergenerational dynamics within the Malaysian Chinese community is to analyse films that depict Malaysian Chinese families, as such films come to represent the salient features of cultural dynamics generally practised by Malaysian Chinese families. The following section will provide a brief description of the evolution of Malaysian Chinese films in general, moving into the representation of family in Malaysian Chinese films and finally, the reasons for selecting *The Journey* as representational film for this analysis.

## **BRIEF BACKGROUND OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE FILMS**

Prior to 2000, in line with the authoritative discourse of Malay-centred nationalism, the focus of Malaysian cinema is on ethnic Malay realities especially in films of the 1980s and 1990s. The first Malaysian film directed by a Malaysian of Chinese descent to penetrate the hegemonic Malay film industry that reigned up until 2000 is *Spinning Gasing* (2000) by Teck Tan.

With its depiction of cross-cultural love relationships and feature of non-Malay lead actors who conversed in multiple languages of Malay, Chinese and English, *Spinning Gasing* is the first film “to deal with Chinese issues and problems in mainstream cinema” (Hassan, 2013: 216). Importantly, *Spinning Gasing* departed from the stereotypical Malay ideological cinema scene and was the first film to foreground inter-ethnic and cross-cultural issues in mainstream cinema. Mainstream cinema in Malaysia prior to the new millennium points to film culture and theatrical practices that foreground the dominant Muslim Malay culture and concerns as representative of Malaysian national cinema (Chang, 2017: 53).

In terms of Malaysian Chinese film, as far back as can be traced from FINAS website, Filemkita.com and Imdb.com websites, arguably the first Malaysian Chinese film is *Ah Beng Returns* (2001) by James Lee. It is an experimental feature, with an entire cast comprising of ethnic Chinese actors, about a group of Chinese communist gangsters who are unexpectedly confronted by a supposedly killed member Ah Beng, who has return.

The early representations of Malaysian Chinese community on the silver screen tend to depict middle class Malaysian Chinese subjects struggling in search of an identity amidst a landscape of anxiety, apprehension, alienation and disorientation against the background of a rapidly modernizing and multiracial,

multicultural Kuala Lumpur in the 1990s (Chang, 2017: 13). James Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004), Tan Chui Mui's *Love Conquers All* (2006) are creative works that both express how young Malaysian Chinese protagonists lost a sense of belonging and experience alienation in the capitalistic city of Kuala Lumpur. Such depiction reflects the realities of the Malaysian Chinese community of the 1980s whereby the Malaysian Chinese community found themselves marginalised in a nation whereby the cultural environment privileges the dominant Malay culture as Malaysian national culture as well as economic policies that prioritises members of the indigenous ethnic group, that is the Muslim Malay majority (Chang, 2017: 96).

## **REPRESENTATION OF THE FAMILY IN MALAYSIAN CHINESE FILMS**

Sharon Carstens (2018) explains that Malaysian Chinese audiences of the 1980s and 1990s preferred productions from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China for various reasons. In contradiction to the higher budget and technically and artistically more advanced international films from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, locally produced Chinese programs were "uniformly dismissed as inferior products and generally a waste of time" (Carsten, 2018: 195). In terms of the films' audio-visual effect and storyline, Malaysian Chinese audiences preferred the more appealing, exciting and interesting overseas productions.

As gathered from official records on FINAS website, the early representations of Malaysian Chinese films in the first decade of 2000 tend to take on limited genres of drama and horror. It was not until a decade later, that is from 2010 onwards, that significant changes took place in the social and cultural realm in terms of filmic representations.

From 2010 on, ethnic Chinese filmmakers were more confident to explore a wider variety of genres and produce a larger number of films, and started to capture the Chinese family on the silver screen thereby expanding the visibility and representation of the Malaysian Chinese family. Supported by improved professional training and experience in filmmaking as well as expanded distribution channels of Malaysian Chinese films, these films started to resonate with local audiences who hitherto were more used to the Chinese-language films from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Notable Malaysian Chinese family feature films that were box office hits are Ah Niu's *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* (2010) (RM4 million), Chiu Keng Guan's *Great Day* (2011) (RM6.5 million), *The Journey* (2014) (RM17.17 million) and Jess Teong's *The Kid from Big Apple* (2016) (RM5.3 million) (FINAS). Now, with two full decades worth of filmmaking by Malaysian Chinese producers-directors and a sizeable corpus of visual representation of Malaysian Chinese families in films, it is timely to analyse the

portrayal of intergenerational family dynamics and the evolving cultural identities as depicted in Malaysian Chinese films. Hitherto, there is a lack of studies on the notion of the Chinese family, its cultural practices and intergenerational dynamics as reflected in Malaysian Chinese films. As such, this paper aims to fill this gap.

## **NOTION OF FAMILY AND INTERGENERATIONAL NEGOTIATION**

The notion of family is an all too familiar concept in people's daily life. Family, which is the basic component of the modern society, is an important social institution that is ubiquitously present in every culture across the globe. In general, the family is an intimate domestic group and is the nucleus of all social structure. Socialization functions of family enable the acclimatization of the new generation by educating children about socio-cultural values and norms through language, moral ideas and social behaviours of the family members (Burgess and Locke, 1953). Rapid increase in transnational mobility and globalised communication flows have had a great effect on family life. From a socio-cultural perspective, transnational movements have induced significant changes in individual Chinese diaspora and their families. Factors such as the migration process as well as inter-cultural marriages have contributed to the displacement of cultural identity of the individual and destabilized family values and reshaped generational relations within the family.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Interestingly, the film *The Journey* provides the space for analysis of intergenerational dialogue and negotiations. Through a close reading of the film, this paper analyses intergenerational dynamics and draw insights on the phenomenon of intergenerational ambivalence, consequently leading to negotiation of cultural values. The need for dialogue between different generations is particularly significant in a familial context to promote intergenerational understanding and maintain familial cohesion. The film engages with issues of Malaysian Chinese family as a set of relationships – namely, the relationships between traditional cultural values and the needs of modern life, as well as the relationship between the older and younger family members.

The study of the dialogue between voices from different generations and cultural backgrounds show that there is space for negotiation of intergenerational and cross-cultural barriers, thereby promoting mutual understanding between generations and an appreciation of different cultural values. This process shows the evolving interpretations and articulations of Chineseness and Confucian

values, yet maintaining the stance that the family institution is to be seen as custodians preserving and regulating traditional cultural values.

### **THE JOURNEY AS REPRESENTATIONAL FILM OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE FAMILY DYNAMICS**

Released in 2014, *The Journey* is a Malaysian Chinese family drama directed by Chiu Keng Guan and written by Ryon Lee. The film won four awards in the 27<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Film Festival and collected RM17.17 million at the Malaysian box office in 56 days of screening. It is ranked amongst the top ten highest grossing Malaysian film of all-time as of December 2019 (Malay Mail).

By looking closely into interactions and portrayals of the characters in the film, this paper analyses the varied and shifting ways the older and younger family members negotiate and (re)calibrate the notions of *ren* (benevolence), *xiao* (filial piety) and *li* (propriety). Additionally, the film involves the transnational relocation of characters, thus injecting a transnational angle into the analysis. A striking feature that differentiates *The Journey* from other Malaysian Chinese family films is that this film provides the space for the juxtaposition of cultural values of an older diasporic generation situated in a rural setting against a younger transnational one. Intergenerational dialogue and negotiations between two generations concerning the matter of marriage of the daughter to an ethnic Other drives the film's narrative. As a family drama of the most recent decade, the film also enables the analysis of the implied issues of intergenerational cultural negotiations within the nexus of diaspora, post-colonial studies and transnational studies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN *THE JOURNEY* (2014)**

*The Journey* centres around the relationship between Mr Chuan, a highly conservative father estimated to be of the 1950-60s generation, his daughter, Bee, of the generation born in the 1990s, and Bee's British fiancé, Benji, of similar generation with Bee. Mr Chuan, who is affectionately referred to as 'Uncle Chuan' in the film, leads a life measured by a set of rigid rules guided by traditional Chinese culture. From its opening credits right up to the conclusion of the film, it reveals various details about the cultural entanglement between an older patriarchal figure and his adult daughter and her fiancé.

The central theme that is explored in *The Journey* is the existence of significant moments of intergenerational familial engagements and negotiation and the

implied issues of intergenerational ambivalence resulting from differential cultural outlook. Multiple scenes in the film that portray intergenerational interactions and negotiations reveal instances of asymmetrical views in terms of cultural outlook between the different generations, which this paper will show amounts to a creative reinterpretation of the Confucian virtues of benevolence, filial piety and propriety.

The relationship between intergenerational family members in modern societies is saturated with ambivalence. Ambivalence in an intergenerational context refers to contradictions between social norms of the lived experiences between the different generations within family relationships, which requires some form of negotiation to achieve a common understanding. A situation of ambivalence requires some form of negotiation (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998).

Bee, a Malaysian Chinese woman returns to her rural hometown with her English fiancé, Benji, after spending most of her formative years in England. Bee was sent off to England at the tender age of eight after the death of her mother as her father, Uncle Chuan, was then unable to both care for her while earning a living. Bee returned with Benji with intentions of seeking Uncle's Chuan's blessings for marriage.

The movie began with a scene of Uncle Chuan at a Chinese wedding door games ceremony – a representation of Malaysian Chinese cultural heritage. In Chinese communities, in China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, wedding door games are challenges set up by the bridesmaids for the groom as a ceremonial demonstration of the groom's devotion to the bride. These games typically take place in the morning of the wedding at the bride's family home, before taking the bride from her home. In completing the tasks, the groom receives the help of his groomsmen. These games originated in ancient Chinese folk customs.

In the wedding door games scene, one of the groomsmen was made to take a bite at a banana hung at a certain height while being propped up by the rest of the groomsmen. Thereafter, the groomsmen had to perform push up exercises while wearing red bras and lastly, two groomsmen had to place a balloon filled with milk between their chests and squeeze till it bursts.

To Uncle Chuan, the choices of door games were nonsensical and sexually explicit, as clearly expressed through the audio-visuals of the scene. Symbolically, the banana represents a phallic imagery, whilst the red bras and milk-filled-balloons represent the female breasts. Such explicit nature of the imageries disrupts traditional Chinese marriage rites of propriety. Traditionally, common games include the consumption of unpleasant foods, answering of questions pertaining to the bride and performance of song and dance. Visually,

Uncle Chuan expressed disapproving facial expressions, while the dialogues and remarks explicitly points to his disdain at the lack of propriety in the youngsters' conduct. In one of the games, when Uncle Chuan was accidentally splashed with milk from the popped balloon, he remarked to the host that the wedding ceremony was embarrassing and improperly conducted. He then commented disdainfully on the bridegroom's pink and blonde hair colour. A direct translation of his contemptuous remark: "The hair colour neither resembles a human, nor a ghost". Uncle Chuan's displeasure with the choice of door games and the bridegroom's hair colour stems from his interpretation that these mannerisms does not align with the Confucian virtue of propriety accorded to marriage ceremonies and the appropriate outlook of a mature person.

In Book of Rites, a classic Confucian text, under the section on the meaning of marriage, it is stated that: -

The ceremony of marriage was intended to be a bond of love between two (families of different) surnames, with a view, in its retrospective character, to secure the services in the ancestral temple, and in its prospective character, to secure the continuance of the family line. Therefore, the superior men, (the ancient rules), set a great value upon it.

(Legge, Chai and Winberg, 1967: 414)

It is only in performing the marriage rituals in a manner guided by propriety that the marriage ceremony is respected and its importance exhibited, and care must be taken such that the rituals of the ceremony should be performed correctly. It is in the accordance of respect, caution, importance, the attention to secure the propriety in the details of the marriage ceremony, and then the pledge of mutual affection that collectively constitute the sanctity of the occasion which altogether "serves to establish the distinction to be observed between man and woman, and the righteousness to be maintained between husband and wife" (Legge, Chai and Winberg, 1967: 415).

In the observance of Confucian propriety, older persons may have different social expectations about proper behaviour and expectations from their younger counterparts. In the above scene, the filmmakers portrayed the virtue of propriety dominant in Uncle Chuan's cultural orientation in contradistinction to that of the younger generation.

The setting of the film at the rural hills, where Uncle Chuan has led most of his life, visually illustrates the rural and urban split between the two generations. Two distinct worlds are presented, which represent two different spaces and cultures the two generations inhabit. The director created an older character in a

traditional conservative rural backdrop juxtaposed against two younger characters returning from a transnational, cosmopolitan space. By situating Uncle Chuan in a rural highland scene, it visually signifies the continuation of preserved cultural traditions unscathed by the forces of commercialism. Symbolically, in traditional rural areas, traditional practices continue, as do moral judgements.

Unsurprisingly, at the beginning of the film, Uncle Chuan objects to Bee's choice of Benji, a Westerner, as husband. At the dinner table scene, Uncle Chuan reprimanded Bee for introducing a Western man as her choice of marriage partner. He remarked, "You don't even sound like a Chinese. Had all the men died out? Out of all men, you fall in love with a Westerner". The tension between Uncle Chuan and Bee is palpable as seen from the tense exchange and facial expressions, with the former reprimanding the latter that she has become unreasonable after living abroad for too long, implying that she has lost her Chinese cultural values. Uncle Chuan's dissatisfaction can be interpreted as his unwillingness to accept a "cultural outsider" as son-in-law. As a native British, Benji is a cultural outsider to the Chinese community, with cultural differences compounded by unfamiliarity with the Chinese language, culture and customs. In desiring to tie the knot with a non-Chinese, it seems that Bee is choosing to distance herself from her cultural heritage.

The film started with Benji represented as ignorant of Chinese culture and customs. On the first day of the Lunar New Year, as a marker of the importance of the commencement of a new year, the younger generation is expected to ready oneself to pay respect to the parents as elders. Confucian philosophy is a system based on stratified relations, foregrounded in patriarchy and parental authority. In the *Book of Rites*, it states that "when the people knew to honour their elders and nourish their aged, then at home they could practise filial piety and fraternal duty. Filial and fraternal at home and abroad, honouring elders and nourishing the aged, then their education was complete..." (Legge, Chai and Winberg, 1967: 419).

Unfamiliar with Chinese culture, Benji neglected to ready himself on the morning of the first day of the Lunar New Year until lamented by Bee. Additionally, Benji's inability to speak Chinese made it difficult to communicate with Uncle Chuan, who could only converse in Chinese. These cultural and linguistic unfamiliarity contributed to Uncle Chuan's lack of acceptance of Benji as son-in-law, a situation further compounded by issues of intergenerational misunderstandings.

As the movie progresses, upon the advice from neighbours to allow the younger generation agency to direct their lives, Uncle Chuan implicitly agreed to the marriage. In relenting on his rigid ways and acceding to the union, it can be

argued that a community factor played a part in influencing intergenerational relationships. As Uncle Chuan took in the advice from neighbours who are part of his generation, the intergenerational tension between father and daughter saw a sense of consensus regarding the marriage. However, Uncle Chuan required that a wedding banquet be held, and to extend invitations to all the guests by hand. This is his way of assigning importance to the occasion and according ceremonial propriety to mark the significance of the celebration.

The various scenes that depict entanglement between father and daughter reveal a form of challenge to traditional patriarchal identity and authority, and the emerging identity involves an evolving cultural malleability on both generations. Though tension is experienced in the intergenerational relationship, it is seen that the father demonstrated the spirit of benevolence in acceding to the marriage, while Bee exhibited a strong sense of filiality in seeking her father's blessing for her marriage and persuading Benji to accede to hand deliver the invitations.

While the father is inclined to uphold traditional Chinese customs, Bee represents one who is influenced by her experience as a Chinese woman who grew up in the transnational setting of a western liberal society. Bee is depicted as one that orients towards a mixture of Chinese culture heritage and ideas of Western individualism. In certain situations, she conforms with certain family roles and expectations deemed important in Chinese culture, yet in other circumstances, she retains a sense of personal subjectivity that may run contradictory to traditional culture. For example, retorting to Benji's protests on sending the wedding invitations by hand, Bee requested that Benji concede to her father's wishes so that the marriage can proceed, somewhat like a transactional exchange for her father's blessing. To Uncle Chuan, delivering the invitations personally was to observe the form of propriety as well as to accord respect and honour to the guests.

In a medium shot in which Bee and Benji are staged in the living room, Benji said that he "has already compromised with the banquet dinner". It can be implied from this statement that Benji views marriage from a "personal" point of view and one can extrapolate a sense of reluctance to hold a banquet in the sense that he had to compromise to holding one so as to satisfy Uncle Chuan's traditional insistence on having the marriage banquet.

In Confucian terms, marriage is not just a private matter, but a family matter that will affect the family's standing in the community. That is to say that one's own interest takes second place in relation to the collectivist principle of the family unit or community. Uncle Chuan insists the wedding banquet to be performed in accordance with Chinese customs in conformance with the concept of ceremonial propriety. By inviting all his old classmates to attend the wedding, as a patriarch



of the family, Uncle Chuan derives a great sense of pride, dignity and propriety of having raised a daughter well and who also got married in a dignified manner.

To the request by Bee to accompany her father to deliver the invitations, Benji retorted confoundedly, "... what about post, what about e-mail, what about bloody sms...". In this medium shot living room scene, Bee and Benji are negotiating about the wedding banquet and the delivery of invitations. Then, from a sitting position Benji stands up and moves towards the left side of the frame. The positioning of the following scene with Benji standing at full length and Bee seated in a close up shot introduces a sense of tension into the conversation, which signifies a cultural clash between traditional Chinese values in Bee in her request to hand deliver the invitations, and an individualistic Benji, who opts for convenience and pragmatism over personal delivery.



Figure 1: Screenshot of the scene in which Benji is standing at the left side of the frame and Bee is seated in a close up shot, a means to create tension between the characters through the imbalance positioning.

Bee's unwillingness to proceed with the marriage without her father's blessings points to her desires to fulfil her duty as a filial daughter in return for the emotional and financial sacrifices he had endured for sending her abroad. Without the benefit of understanding Chinese culture, Benji suspected that Bee was afraid of disagreeing with her father:

Benji: You're afraid of disagreeing with him, are you?

Bee: It's not about fear! It's about Chinese culture.

Benji: Well, it seems to me that you're just giving in to him.

In this indoor medium shot scene, Bee explained that whether it is giving into her father's requests or whatever the reasons for asking Benji to handle the wedding invitations, she ultimately just wanted her father's blessing. Given the importance

of family acceptance and familial relationships in Chinese culture, it follows that parents' approval would feature prominently in the child's choice of a future spouse and marriage arrangements. By asserting the irrelevance for justification regarding the delivery of invitations or for desiring her father's blessing, it indicates that Bee's idea of performing Chinese traditions is foremost driven by a desire to please her father and satisfying filial obligations and such desires require no justification. This can also be interpreted as a younger generation whose performance of traditional Chinese familial custom is guided not by a genuine understanding of the culture, but a transactional one in order to achieve one's objective as well as to maintain familial harmony. Such situation marks a form of intergenerational ambivalence with regards to adherence to tradition, which necessitates some form of intergenerational negotiation. Symbolically, this medium shot scene is used to signify a situation where the two parties have come to a position of mid-compromise – it is not a full wholehearted compromise by the young couple with Uncle Chuan's conditions, but a meeting at a halfway point so as to move beyond the impasse.

From Benji's point of view, he has already conceded to holding a banquet. To him, delivering invitations by hand was troublesome. Unfamiliar with Chinese culture, which values communal human relations over individuality, Benji was unable to appreciate Uncle Chuan's requests to hand deliver invitations. This may be attributed to Benji's Western liberal cultural values; therefore, prioritising individual preference of convenience or freedom of choice over communality.

As children of Chinese descent have internalised the concepts of benevolence and filial piety, they strive to fulfil the parents' wishes and maintain relational harmony. Bee desired her father's blessings for marriage, despite acknowledging that some of the customs are out-dated and unnecessary, such as the need to personally delivering invitations instead of mailing. This signifies an internalised notion of communal self-concept by Chinese children who respond to family obligations through the spirit of filiality, propriety and benevolence. As can be seen, the film provides the space to juxtapose such obligatory relations arising from a Chinese Confucian cultural system against a Western value system that valorises the concept of individual agency and freedom of choice.

While the ethos and practice of filial obligation continue to play a major role in regulating behaviour between parent and child, the manifestation of filiality has been reinterpreted in various ways. From the analysis of the film, this paper shows that family obligations continue to play a significant role in the lives of Malaysian Chinese people, and such obligations appears to persist over historical time, even though conventions associated with the expectations, attitudes and emotions involved in obligation orientations undergo change.

To move the narrative forward, Uncle Chuan and Benji embark on *The Journey* – the film’s titular name – to deliver the invitations. Through the aesthetic framing of various scenes of the two men traveling together on a motorcycle on the highway to the various destinations, the scenes depict an older and younger generation working through a process of intergenerational negotiation and accommodation. The journey took off with Benji driving the motorcycle and Uncle Chuan on the back seat. Subsequently, after Benji lost his wallet and driver’s license, the two characters exchanged roles and positions, with Uncle Chuan as the driver, and Benji as backseat passenger of the motorcycle.



Figure 2: Screenshots of the scenes in which Benji is driving the motorcycle with Uncle Chuan as passenger and both characters switched roles whereby Uncle Chuan drives and Benji as passenger.

These balanced, medium shot scenes whereby the two characters took turns as driver and passenger roles symbolically represent several significant meanings in terms of the dynamics in the intergenerational relationship. For one, it represents the willingness of the two characters, despite their initial differences and cultural polarities, to mutually trust and sufficiently accept each other to share the narrow space of a motorcycle on a long journey together. Furthermore, the scenes on the motorcycle show the common objective and goals of the two men, both striving to achieve one aim, that is the goal of a harmonious union. Lastly, in switching the driver's role from Benji to Uncle Chuan, it signifies acceptance, and simultaneously, mutual dependence of both characters; whereby initially the lead was taken by Benji, and later on, Uncle Chuan as the driver. This demonstrates instances of bi-directional nature of cultural negotiation between the generations. As the two generations spend time getting to know one another on *'The Journey'*, the experiences they share demonstrate the opportunities for intergenerational engagement and negotiation.

According to the Book of Rites, the rituals of ceremonies of marriage were intended to illustrate the separation that should be maintained between men and women (Legge, Chai and Winberg, 1967). The marriage ceremony serves to legitimise the bringing together of a man and woman, whose separation should be maintained prior to the marriage ceremony. It continues to state that, "the ceremonial usages serve as dykes to the people against bad excesses (to which they are prone). They display the separation which should be maintained (between the sexes), that there may be no occasion for suspicion, and the relations of the people be well defined" (1967: 356). Another instance of assertion of traditional Chinese custom is Uncle Chuan's disapproval of Benji sharing a room with Bee, requiring that the young couple stay in separate rooms prior to marriage. A Confucian reading and interpretation of the film prescribes that the autonomy of women's sexuality is to be controlled prior to marriage as the female body is constantly disciplined and sexually repressed to sustain a gendered cultural identity. It promotes heterosexual marriage as the final destination and goal for a woman, whereby women are nature's mothers in a traditional marriage. The traditional Confucian values of propriety and purity characterise women's sexual deviance outside of wedlock as morally degenerate.

However, unbeknownst to her father, Bee is newly pregnant with Benji's baby. This shows that while the older generation adheres to strict Confucian ethics of sexual propriety, the younger generation adopts a more liberal view of sexual intimacy. While Bee has internalised the core concept of filial piety and maintaining familial harmony, she is also more at ease with actualising her subjectivity. In terms of marriage, Bee subscribes to the Chinese familial hierarchy of respect for her father's wishes, but when it comes to matters of individual sexuality, she asserts a sense of agency separate from parental

influence. This is also evident in her decision to tie the knot with a cultural outsider to the Chinese community. These examples demonstrate an evolving Chinese identity in the younger generation, one which applies a mixture of interdependence and independence concepts.

Yet, the ending revealed Uncle Chuan's awareness and acquiescence to the pre-marital pregnancy. Not only did he not admonish it, he approved of the situation as exhibited through his advice not to overtighten the wedding dress just to conceal the bulge. This demonstrates an openness to the notion of malleability of cultural values through a process of cultural negotiation between the two generations.

From the above analysis, the film reveals spaces for the negotiation of traditional Chinese family values to accommodate to the needs of modern life, and this involves a dynamic process of dialogue between the generations and an appreciation of differing perspectives. The moment of intergenerational cultural accommodation is evident towards the end of the film, as culminated in the wedding ceremony and the taking of a family photo with Bee, Benji and Uncle Chuan, representing the acceptance of one another and the bridging of intergenerational and cultural differences.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, *The Journey* showcases a continuous process of a reinterpretation of Chinese cultural practices and the Confucian virtues of benevolence, filial piety and propriety. The film reveals a renegotiation in the practice of family obligations to accommodate changing cultural articulations as well as to account for the individualisation of younger generation Chinese. To an extent, the film also highlights the increasing centrality of horizontal conjugal ties between Bee and Benji and the waning influence of the senior generation.

*The Journey* has identified significant spaces of cultural ambivalence which led to forms of intergenerational negotiation and ultimately cultural accommodation within the family members. The journey of progression in the cultural orientation as exemplified by Uncle Chuan, from one who disapproved of the cross-cultural union between his Chinese daughter and a British man to eventual acceptance of the marriage and the pre-marital pregnancy, are significant indications of the possibilities of intergenerational cultural accommodation.

As for Benji, through *The Journey* to deliver invitations and the opportunities of intergenerational engagement, he eventually came to learn that there exists a deeper meaning to Chinese culture than a blind respect for the elders and an

unquestioning obedience of rites and rituals. As Benji aptly puts it, “Chinese culture is not just about tradition. It’s something that is ... inherently born from love... and the bond between the child and the parent is something that cannot be broken”.

Importantly, the film highlights that strong conjugal bonds does not override the younger generations’ filiality, benevolent and propriety obligations; rather the film teased out the shared ideals of Confucian intergenerational harmony intertwined with conjugality, whereby the characters eventually devised strategies to embody these ideals. Through the character development of both Uncle Chuan, Bee and Benji, the film also unpacks possibilities of a bi-directional nature of intergenerational negotiations whereby both generations are able to mutually recognise and appreciate the viewpoints of the other, and concurrently demonstrate an enduring respect for the values of benevolence, filiality and propriety.

The film also demonstrates the importance of intergenerational reciprocity as well as an understanding that differences in terms of cultural values and beliefs may arise as a result of sociocultural, temporal and generational shifts. To keep up with the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the film reveals an evolving observation of tradition and customs which worked to maintain intergenerational harmony. Yet tradition and customs are necessary for the younger generation to recognise the provenance of Chinese culture based on the universal notion of strong family values and relational harmony. The scene showing Uncle Chuan performing prayers in the temple on the first day of the Lunar New Year is an example of the sustainability of Chinese faith practices that persists.

If the beginning of the film more or less shows a clearly defined set of social rules that are meant to be representative of Chinese ethnic traditions, the closing sequence serves to challenge the ways such social norms are articulated, and eliminate the traditional restrictions placed on ethnic groups and family relationships. Through presenting the family unit as a heterosexual union, despite some forms of cultural malleability across the generations, Malaysian Chinese identity continues to strongly advocate for a heterosexual social contract.

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