



April 2022

## Turning Red

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### Recommended Citation

Dunwoody, Micah (2022) "Turning Red," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 62.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.62>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/62>

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## Turning Red

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Turning Red* (2022) directed by Domee Shi.

### Keywords

Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Ancestor Veneration, Chinese Religion

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### Author Notes

Micah Dunwoody is a Religious Studies major at University of Nebraska Omaha. His interests are in Asian religions, as well as their connection to martial arts. He is currently working on a paper comparing the Shaolin monks of China to the Jedi from Star Wars.

Disney has sometimes attempted to embrace diversity, but their March 2022 release of Pixar's *Turning Red* has provided audiences with a portrayal of secularized religious elements drawn from Chinese religion. In other words, the film makes a bold and clever move of portraying religion in a way that does not seek to preach any religious ideology to the audience. While religious elements are in the film, the film does not focus solely on them. In doing that, it also presented a character who goes through a kind of spiritual development as she grows out of Confucian ideals and accepts a Daoist way of life, blended with Buddhist beliefs and Western individualism.

The story begins with our protagonist, Meilin “Mei” Li<sup>1</sup>, introducing herself as a talented individual and overzealous academic whose schoolmates view her as an overachiever. From a Daoist standpoint, she acts excessively, so instead she abides by the Confucian notion of filial piety by catering to the desires of her mother, Ming. For instance, Mei does not say that she likes a boyband whose music her mother calls filth and unreal. Ming runs a public temple where they honor their ancestor, Seng Yi. In this temple, we see Mei and Ming participate in the Confucian practice of honoring one's ancestors by bowing in front of the altar for Seng Yi and lighting incense for her.

The conflict between Mei and her mother begins when Ming discovers that Mei is obsessed with an older teenaged boy who works at a convenience store. Mei

draws pictures of the older boy in her bedroom, and when her mother comes in to offer her snacks, Mei is nervous her mother may see the notebook with the pictures. When she does, both of them go to the convenience store where Ming expresses her frustration with the boy in front of customers, some of whom are Mei's classmates. That night, Mei has a nightmare of her classmates laughing at her and red panda spirits awakening.

The next morning, Mei finds that she has turned into a giant red panda, where she takes her first step into Daoist practice. She discovers that she can return to her human form by calming down, while getting excited or nervous reverts her into a red panda. Yin energy allows her to retain her human form, but yang energy causes her to turn into a red panda. In learning how to shapeshift, she is participating in a kind of Daoist alchemical practice where she must direct her yang and yin energies by regulated breathing. To add another religious element to it, she says to herself, "Zen," a name which both symbolizes calmness in Western popular culture and refers to a branch of Buddhism that was inspired by Daoism; however, she still wants to please her mother, and this can be inferred when she becomes human again and calls herself 'Li' instead of 'Mei'.

Regardless of wanting to please her Confucianist mother, Mei will be in conflict with her. While Chinese society is known for the trinity of Daoism-Buddhism-Confucianism, there were conflicts between Daoists and Confucianists,

which is exemplified by Mei and Ming. Whereas Mei is connected to nature by being able to turn into a red panda, Ming wants Mei to succeed in the physical world to bring honor to the family. This is also an ideal in China today, which puts pressure on individuals who strive for economic success. Her mother even treats Mei's power as a curse when she finds out, and offers Mei the opportunity to get rid of it on May 25<sup>th</sup>, the night of a red moon. Mei's father, on the other hand, seems to uphold Daoist ways by complimenting Mei for her red panda form.

Once her friends learn about Mei's ability, they find a way for Mei to use it to the advantage of all of them. Her three friends, Miriam, Priya, and Abby still support her, and their love helps Mei to embrace Daoism by not being overjoyed or devastated by events so that she can retain her human form. All four of them want to go to the concert of a boyband called 4Town, so they publicize Mei's ability at their school and charge students to take pictures with Mei in her red panda form. The goal of Mei and her friends is to gain \$800 for four tickets. In doing this, Mei embraces Western individualism, and again goes against what her mother wants. At this point, we see a girl who is coming of age, and does so in a Daoist way of being while incorporating Zen Buddhist calmness and the Western ideal of being one's own person.

Mei is able to reach their financial goal by turning into the red panda at the birthday party of their classmate Tyler, for the attendants' amusement. Her mother

insists on going with her, thinking that Mei is attending an after-school club, only to see Mei's grandmother and aunts enter the temple. They have come to check on Mei, and before Mei sneaks out, her grandmother says that she knows what she is doing, and that Mei can no longer become the red panda lest the ritual be ineffective. At the party, she first refuses to turn into the red panda, but changes her mind when each of her friends is willing to not attend the concert so that the other three can go. When Mei realizes that the concert is the same night as the ritual, however, she loses her temper and attacks Tyler; her mother encounters Mei in her anger, and blames Priya, Miriam, and Abby under the assumption that they have been taking advantage of Mei. Mei does not stand up for her friends because she does not want to be admonished by her mother.

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, the night of the ritual, Mei has obeyed filial piety but Daoist teachings still come her way to help her express herself. Her father watches a video of her with her friends having fun as the red panda. He tells Mei that he enjoys the video and that we should not push away our "messy" sides, but "make room for it, live with it." This expresses a Taoist idea of balance found in chapter twenty-two of the *Daode Ching*: "The empty is filled. The imperfect is completed."<sup>2</sup> One way in which one can interpret the text is that as one empties oneself spiritually, one allows oneself to be filled with beneficial forces, and that it is the balance of our attributes that perfects us. This is a teaching that will influence her soon thereafter.

The ritual begins, headed by a Daoist priest who calls himself a shaman. Nevertheless, he wears priestly robes and a hat, and wields a sword. In Daoism, swords are used in exorcisms to expel demons from possessed individuals. The red panda spirit is the perceived “demon” that must be expelled from Mei with the help of her family singing from their hearts. The ritual nearly succeeds, but Mei keeps her red panda spirit and rushes to the concert. At this point, Mei has decided to act for herself, not for her mother’s desires. Her mother is aggravated by Mei’s individuation, and her own giant panda spirit takes form.

Mei and Ming fight at the concert in their panda forms. The family arrives to redo the ritual, this time to release her mother of the red panda spirit. Mei and Ming’s fight ends with Ming unconscious and Mei dragging her body into the ritual circle with help from her grandmother and aunts. The ritual is performed by the priest with the help of the boyband who sing from their hearts. The cooperation of all the people present displays an idea found in another passage from the *Daode Ching*, in chapter 57: “I do not force my way and the people transform themselves.”<sup>3</sup> In essence, everybody helps Mei who has become her own person. Such willful singing allows the spirits of Mei and her family to ascend into the spirit realm, where they disconnect from their red panda spirits. Mei is the only one who keeps it, as she is blessed with its possession by Seng Yi. In the end, Ming accepts Mei for her ability to turn into the red panda and her newfound independence. Mei

admits near the end of the film that change is inevitable, which brings a Buddhist element into her newfound wisdom.

This film may or not be taken to be religious. Portrayals of Chinese religious elements are neither apparent to most audiences nor identified. Some background characters are Muslim, as is indicated by their wearing of turbans and hijabs. *Turning Red* raises the question of whether secular portrayals of religion will become more common in the future. Some viewers would not take the film to be about spiritual development, but rather a coming-of-age story about a teenaged girl. Others may interpret Mei's development as Confucian, or even Buddhist—and in constructing their diverse interpretations, viewers will demonstrate the rich variety of religious ideas present in the film.

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<sup>1</sup> In Chinese culture, family names come before first names. In this article, it is adopting the American tradition of first names coming before family last names.

<sup>2</sup> Tzu, Lao. *Daode Ching*. Translated by Yi-Ping Ong, Barnes and Noble Books, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.