

The Americanized Journey of Chinese Immigrants: The Media Representation of Chinese Immigrants in Disney's *Elemental* (2023)

Patrisia Amanda Pascarina^{a,1,*}, Louisa Christine Hartanto^{b,2}, Jennifer Esther^{b,3}

^a Universitas Ciputra Surabaya, CBD Boulevard Citraland, Surabaya 60219, Indonesia

¹ patrisia.amanda@ciputra.ac.id*; ² christine.hartanto@ciputra.ac.id; ³ jesther01@alumni.ciputra.ac.id

* Corresponding author



ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: February 23, 2024

Revised: March 16, 2024

Accepted: April 26, 2024

Keywords

Chinese immigrants

elemental

cultural integration

media representation

semiotic analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the portrayal of Chinese immigrants in the animated film “Elemental,” using Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework to dissect the film’s narrative and thematic elements. “Elemental” serves as a modern allegory, reflecting the historical and ongoing struggles of Chinese immigrants in the United States, blending elements of cultural identity and adaptation within a fantastical setting. The film juxtaposes the fire element of immigrants with the traditional Chinese immigrant experience, examining themes of cultural integration, systemic discrimination, and the influence of media representation on public perceptions. Through denotative and connotative analyses, the research identifies how the film uses visual and verbal cues to construct a narrative that both challenges and perpetuates long-standing myths and stereotypes about Chinese immigrants. This study not only highlights the specific cinematic portrayal of Chinese immigrants but also discusses broader societal implications, including the impact of “Yellow Peril” propaganda and the role of media in shaping immigration policy discourse. The findings suggest that while “Elemental” contributes to a richer dialogue on cultural diversity, it also reveals the enduring complexities and challenges faced by Chinese immigrants in seeking acceptance and identity in a multicultural society.

 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12928/channel.v12i1.708>

This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY-SA](#) license



INTRODUCTION

In 2013 Pope Francis visited Lampedusa, Italy. He notably advocated for the construction of “bridges, not walls” to aid asylum-seeking immigrants (White, 2023). Lampedusa has become emblematic as a primary entry point for migrants, predominantly from North Africa. A decade later, in September 2023, the island was overwhelmed by a surge of 7,000 immigrants within just two days, originating from Tunisia amidst political turmoil and natural disasters, sparking concerns at the International Organization for Migration about a potential increase in such influxes (Nadeau et al., 2023).

Conversely, the United States represents a sought-after destination for immigrants, drawn by the promise of diverse opportunities and the so-called “American Dream”. Immigrants and their descendants constitute about a quarter of the U.S. population, a figure that doubles the population of Canada and slightly exceeds that of France or Italy (Foner, 2009). Among these, Chinese Americans form one of the largest Asian groups in the U.S., with an estimated 2.5 million individuals. Their migration began in the 1850s during China’s economic downturn, with many seeking fortunes in California’s Gold Rush, where they were often relegated to roles of cheap labor (PBS, 2008).

By the 1990s, Chinatowns had become a cultural staple in the U.S., with New York City’s Chinatown alone housing approximately 100,000 Chinese Americans. These neighborhoods frequently appear in media, contributing to the cultural narrative in films such as Marvel’s *Shang Chi* and Disney’s *Turning Red*, which emphasize the significance of Chinese cultural and familial values. Such media representations reflect the deep-rooted expectations within Chinese immigrant communities regarding educational and economic achievement, which are seen as essential to honoring family and cultural heritage.

The blending of cultural practices from their homelands with those adopted in new environments creates a dynamic interplay, often resulting in innovative cultural syntheses (Kumaradjaja & Kumaradjaja, 2024). However, this mixture can also lead to tensions, particularly as non-immigrant populations may perceive immigrant cultures as both exotic and threatening. This perception is highlighted in Wang's (2012) analysis of the depiction of Chinese women in Hollywood, which explores the anxieties surrounding interracial relationships and the preservation of racial purity.

The portrayal of immigrants in contemporary media also plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. Today's media landscapes are rife with debates and portrayals that reflect societal tensions over immigration, race, and identity. These portrayals are often influenced by longstanding cultural norms and aesthetics, which dictate the representation of various groups within the media (Bertin, 2023).

The term "woke" media, recently attributed to Disney by some critics, refers to media efforts to address social injustices through the inclusion of minority perspectives. Despite the noble intentions, such initiatives can lead to controversies like "Cancel Culture," where historical and contemporary figures are judged without sufficient contextual understanding (Paché, 2022). Nevertheless, Disney has made notable strides in diversifying its narratives, as seen in recent films such as *Encanto* (2021), *Turning Red* (2022), *Raya and The Last Dragon* (2021), and *Elemental* (2023), which attempt to broaden the portrayal of cultural diversity.

Elemental uniquely explores the immigrant experience through its protagonists, who belong to the fictional "fire nation," navigating life in the diverse but challenging environment of Elemental City. This study aims to delve deeper into the film's portrayal of Chinese immigrants in a fictional American setting, employing Barthes' semiotics to unravel the myths and stereotypes surrounding their depiction.

METHOD

In this study, we utilize Roland Barthes' framework of semiotics to analyze the representation of Chinese immigrants in the film *Elemental*. This methodological approach allows for a deeper examination of various cinematic elements such as shooting techniques, color composition, dialogue, body movements, and facial expressions. Sobur (2017) emphasizes the significant role of the reader in interpreting signs, asserting that active reader engagement is crucial for uncovering deeper meanings, particularly in the realm of connotation.

Barthes criticizes Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic model for its simplicity, advocating instead for a two-tiered system of signification encompassing both denotation and connotation, which he further extends to the concept of myth. Denotation refers to the literal, commonly accepted meaning of a sign, serving as a foundational reference point. In contrast, connotation involves deeper, often subjective interpretations that incorporate social, cultural, and historical contexts, transforming denotative signs into signifiers of broader significance. This progression from denotation to connotation may eventually culminate in the formation of myths—culturally pervasive narratives that transcend their original contexts and are linguistically manifested in discourse (Sobur, 2017).



Fig. 1. Stages on analyzing *Elemental* (2023) movie
Source: Compiled by researchers (2023)

This research employs a two-stage analytical framework to dissect the representation of Chinese immigrant characters in the film *Elemental*, utilizing a methodology influenced by Arthur Asa Berger's analysis (Berger, 2018).

A. Stage One: Denotative Analysis

In the initial phase, the entire film is viewed without fast-forwarding to ensure comprehensive coverage and context. Key scenes depicting father figures are captured through screenshots to serve as research archives. These screenshots represent the denotative marks—the basic, descriptive level of the analysis. This stage focuses on dissecting these visual elements through Berger's lens, considering camera framing, movement, types of shots, lens choices, lighting, and coloring. These components are documented and analyzed as Signifier I and Signified I. The methodological

advantage of Berger's approach is its structured framework, which facilitates the systematic interpretation of visual data within film frames.

B. Stage Two: Connotative Analysis and Myth Formation

The second stage of analysis builds on the results from Signifier I and Signified I. These are then elevated to the level of Signifier II, where they are correlated with broader cultural, familial, and belief systems relevant to the portrayal of the Chinese immigrant group in *Elemental*. This stage delves into the connotative meanings derived from the film's portrayal of these characters, examining how various elements such as physical characteristics, family history, and cultural beliefs are interwoven into the narrative. The ultimate goal here is to uncover the myths associated with Chinese immigrants in Hollywood films, specifically how these myths are constructed through the cinematic portrayal of beliefs and cultural traits.

This research seeks to understand how the film constructs its narrative through visual and verbal signs that initially appear straightforward but reveal complex connotations influencing audience perception. The semiotic analysis endeavors to reveal how the film's portrayal of Chinese immigrants contributes to or challenges existing myths within cultural discourse, thus providing insights into the interplay between media representations and societal beliefs. In addition, by advancing from denotation to connotation and ultimately to myth this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Chinese immigrant characters are represented in *Elemental*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION



Fig. 2. Elemental movie poster, released in June 2023
Source: Disney.co.uk (2023)

In examining the narrative and thematic elements of *Elemental* (2023), the film presents an allegorical exploration of immigration and cultural integration through the lens of fantasy. The film, set in Elemental City, uses the personification of natural elements—water, earth, wind, and fire—to depict a complex society where immigrants from the “fire nation” struggle to integrate with the dominant groups of other elemental citizens. The central plot revolves around a fire nation couple who, upon relocating to Elemental City, encounter significant resistance and prejudice from the local inhabitants, a portrayal reflective of the challenges faced by immigrants worldwide. The narrative deepens with their daughter, Ember Lumen, who grapples with her identity and heritage while striving to protect her family's livelihood amid stringent local regulations.

Despite its initial box office underperformance, where it secured only the 17th position among Pixar's highest-grossing films with earnings of \$486.7 million (Thompson, 2023), *Elemental* gained a substantial audience on Disney+, where it generated \$26.4 million within five days of its release on the streaming platform. This resurgence highlights the film's appeal to a broader digital audience and underscores Disney's commitment to presenting narratives that give voice to often underrepresented or misunderstood communities.

Elemental is noted for its innovative approach to character design and storytelling, where the elements themselves serve as a metaphor for diverse human characteristics and societal roles. This method allows for a nuanced portrayal of

gender and cultural identity, avoiding traditional physical representations and instead opting for an elemental depiction that transcends conventional gender binaries. Such a choice can be interpreted as an effort to challenge and redefine stereotypes within cinematic expressions, contributing to ongoing discussions about diversity and representation in media. Furthermore, the film's portrayal of societal rejection and acceptance mirrors contemporary issues concerning immigration, integration, and identity politics. Disney continues to push the boundaries of traditional animated storytelling by incorporating themes that resonate with global socio-cultural dynamics, as demonstrated in their previous works and continued with *Elemental*.

A. The “Yellow Peril” Racism

The concept of self-replication, as discussed by Putra et al. (2022), encompasses change, improvement, and adaptation, illustrating a process where errors from previous genetic codes are discarded to facilitate ongoing developmental history throughout life. This notion parallels the societal responses observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, according to some reports, is believed to have originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China. This theory propagated global repercussions, influencing social behavior and policy across different regions. For the rest of the world, the pandemic was primarily perceived as a public health crisis, focusing on the safety and well-being of communities (Salim et al., 2023). Contrastingly, in Western countries, the outbreak has sometimes been framed through a racial lens, leading to significant repercussions for Chinese immigrants. Misinformation and unfounded assumptions about the virus's origins fostered an environment ripe for discrimination, as noted by Kim and Kesari (2021). These biases were not isolated incidents but part of a broader wave of racialized responses that saw Chinese and other Asian immigrants facing increased hate crimes and discrimination. The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate Coalition reported a distressing tally of 11,467 racially motivated violent incidents against Asian Americans from March 19, 2020, to March 31, 2022 (Lee, 2022). This statistic likely underrepresents the full scope of the issue, as many incidents go unreported. Based on the data collected, the AAPI Hate Coalition estimated that around 25% of Asian Americans have encountered hate speech during this period, highlighting the pervasive and damaging impact of racial prejudices exacerbated by the pandemic.



Fig. 3. The arrival of Bernie and Cinder to Elemental City
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

In the narrative of *Elemental*, Elemental City initially hosted only water elements, gradually incorporating earth and air elements over time. The arrival of the fire elements, represented by the couple Bernie and Cinder, marked a significant point of cultural and social integration within this diverse elemental society. As depicted in **Figure 3**, upon their arrival, the immigration authorities assign Bernie and Cinder new names that align with the linguistic norms of Elemental City, a common practice in many cultures to aid assimilation but also a potential source of identity loss. The film poignantly captures the challenges faced by Bernie and Cinder as they navigate their new environment. Despite their initial fascination with the city's diverse inhabitants, the couple quickly encounters overt hostility. This aggression ranges from verbal insults, such as Bernie being derogatorily called “Sparky” by an air element, to more systemic obstacles like difficulty in securing housing. Their experiences reflect real-world issues faced by many immigrants, including discrimination and social exclusion.

Their perseverance is symbolized by their discovery and renovation of a dilapidated house on the city's outskirts, where Bernie, filled with optimism, envisions a new beginning. He opens a shop named “The Fireplace,” transforming a place of rejection into one of belonging and community.

Bernie and Cinder's story in *Elemental* offers a poignant parallel to the historical journey of Chinese immigrants to the United States during the California Gold Rush. The discovery of gold in 1848 near Coloma by James Marshall set

off a frenzy that drew thousands, including a significant number of Chinese laborers. These laborers, starting with a small group of 60 in Tuolumne in the summer of 1849, were part of the early wave of immigrants seeking fortune and a new life. By the end of 1852, the Chinese immigrant population in California had swelled to 20,000, comprising about 10% of the state's population and 20% of its miners (Lee, 2022). Despite their significant contributions to the mining industry and the economic development of California, Chinese immigrants faced severe discrimination and legal restrictions, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred the immigration of their families and solidified their status as an unwelcome group within the multiethnic fabric of the United States (Lyman, 2000).

The term “Yellow Peril” emerged in the 19th century, during a period when Chinese laborers were brought to the U.S. as an inexpensive workforce, positioned to fill the labor void left by the recently emancipated enslaved Black community. These Chinese workers, often paid less than their white counterparts, were subjected to significant racial prejudice from white workers who perceived them as threats to their economic security and racial hierarchy (Weik, 2020). This fear was exacerbated by the stereotype of Chinese laborers possessing a disciplined and meticulous work ethic, which some white workers believed undermined the notion of “white purity” (Wu & Nguyen, 2022). During the late 19th and into the mid-20th century, this xenophobic sentiment was often depicted in popular culture and propaganda, which exaggerated these fears through racialized imagery. One of the most stark portrayals included caricatures of octopuses with slanted eyes, symbolizing an Asian threat encircling the globe, or distressing images of a defenseless white woman threatened by Asian malevolence (Chun, 2020).



Fig. 4. Matchmaking service by Cinder is seen as a paganism practice
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

The portrayal of the “Yellow Peril” stereotype encompasses more than economic fears; it also extends into the cultural and religious practices of Chinese immigrants. In the 19th century, these immigrants were often wrongfully accused of paganism, which led to severe consequences including mass murders and riots directed against Chinese and other Asian communities (Lee, 2022). Elemental cleverly integrates these historical prejudices through its narrative elements, as seen in Cinder’s matchmaking service (**Figure 4**). In the film, Cinder’s use of incense during matchmaking services mirrors real-world Chinese religious practices that involve incense burning as a ritualistic precursor to prayer. While such practices are widely accepted today, they were historically misconstrued by white Americans as forms of satanic worship and perceived as threats to Christian values. This misunderstanding fueled further discrimination and contributed to the broader cultural fear encapsulated by the “Yellow Peril.” Elemental uses its elemental characters—water, earth, and air—to metaphorically represent the societal segments of white Americans who perpetuated these stereotypes. The discrimination faced by the fire element characters in the film, including forced name changes, racial slurs, intense scrutiny, and accusations of pagan practices, parallels the real-world racial violence and systemic injustices experienced by Chinese immigrants.

B. The Distress of Being a Second-Class Citizen

The demographic shifts within the Chinese-American community have significantly shaped the experiences of the second generation of Chinese immigrants, particularly those born post-1965 or raised primarily in the United States. Min Zhou (2009) identifies three primary environmental contexts that have been crucial in understanding the life and challenges of these individuals: Chinatowns centrally located in urban areas, ethnoburbs (ethnically diverse suburbs), and areas on the peripheries of predominantly white, middle-class cities. One of the pervasive challenges across these contexts is economic self-sufficiency.

The historical context surrounding the citizenship and rights of Chinese immigrants in the United States underwent a significant shift following the enactment of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952. This legislation allowed Chinese immigrants, who had been largely excluded by previous laws, to gain U.S. citizenship and the right to vote. Despite

these advancements, the societal integration of Chinese immigrants was fraught with challenges, as they continued to be treated as second-class citizens (Lee, 2022). The concept of a “second-class citizen” has philosophical roots traced back to Aristotle’s classification of societal roles. According to Aristotle, society was stratified, and not all members held the same rights or status. In his view, an “unorderly” group that disobeyed the current rulers was often marginalized or seen as lesser. Expanding on this philosophical groundwork, Kraut and Skultety (2005) interpret second-class citizenship in terms of developmental status within societal structures. They argue that the notion of being “developed” pertains to the governance structure within a family, where the father, as the head, is considered a first-class citizen. Other family members are seen as second-class citizens due to their perceived inability to lead. This status is dynamic, however, as a son may ascend to first-class citizenship upon establishing his own family and assuming the role of the head.



Fig. 5. Public sector jobs are handled by water, earth, and wind elements while fire element must open their businesses

Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

In *Elemental*, the narrative constructs a vivid allegory for the historical and socio-economic challenges faced by Chinese immigrants in the United States. The fear of immigrants “stealing” jobs has been a persistent theme in American history, particularly affecting Chinese communities. This xenophobia significantly isolated Chinese Americans from public sector employment, compelling them to establish their businesses as a means of survival. Similarly, in the film, Bernie remodels an old house into a shop named “The Fireplace,” illustrating the immigrant’s response to economic isolation—creating opportunities within the constraints imposed by the dominant society. The portrayal of other elements within Elemental City further mirrors the racial and economic stratification experienced by Chinese immigrants. As depicted in Figure 5, the water elements occupy roles within the city inspector unit, the earth elements are part of the processing department, and the air elements handle managerial tasks. These assignments reflect a hierarchy where the fire elements, akin to the Chinese immigrants, are marginalized. Forced to reside on the city’s outskirts, the fire elements, like the Chinese forming Chinatowns, establish their enclave, which serves both as a sanctuary and a space of exclusion. This segregation and forced entrepreneurship among the fire elements in *Elemental* serve as a critique of the systemic barriers that prevent full integration and equal participation in society. By establishing their version of “Chinatown,” the fire elements not only adapt to but also resist the spatial and economic marginalization imposed by the dominant elemental groups.

The “America First” campaign, as described by Pilkington and Nayak (2016), serves as a poignant example of governmental policies that exacerbate divisions within society by prioritizing “native” Americans in various sectors, effectively marginalizing immigrants. This prioritization not only fosters economic and social inequality but also perpetuates a divisive narrative that places white Americans in a position of inherent superiority over immigrant populations. Housing emerges as a critical indicator of this racial inequality. The ability to access quality housing is a cornerstone of stability and well-being, yet for many immigrants, systemic barriers prevent them from securing adequate accommodation. This inaccessibility contributes to broader patterns of segregation and socioeconomic disparity, reinforcing the social hierarchies that dictate life opportunities and outcomes. Furthermore, Bernal, Misiyasze, Ayala, and Kenley (2022) highlight the psychological implications of such systemic inequalities. The position one holds within the social hierarchy significantly influences their experience of acculturative stress, which is the stress derived from the process of adapting to a new culture. This stress, coupled with the challenges of navigating a society structured to prioritize others’ well-being over that of immigrants, can have detrimental effects on psychological health.



Fig. 6. Unlike Wade's family has an academic background in architecture and art, Ember's skill comes from her work making sugar pop at her dad's shop
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

A scene of note, depicted in **Figure 6**, involves a familial encounter that highlights the intersection of economic background and artistic acknowledgment. During a dinner visit to Wade's home—a water element whose family boasts a lineage of recognized artists—Ember, a fire element, engages with his family. Wade's mother is an accomplished architect, his sister attends Elemental Art School, and his uncle's artwork is displayed in the prestigious Elemental City Museum. This familial heritage positions Wade's family within an esteemed socio-cultural echelon, underscored by their engagement in recognized artistic professions. Conversely, Ember, who possesses the skill to transform glass into intricate art pieces, receives praise from Wade's mother for her artistry. However, Ember herself undervalues this talent, perceiving it as a mere byproduct of her utilitarian role in her father's business, where this skill is employed primarily in the production of sugar pop.

Institutionalized racism encompasses the interactions among macro-level systems, power relations, institutions, and ideologies that systematically foster policies and behaviors that discriminate against specific racial groups (Hardeman, Murphy, J'Mag, & Kozhimanni, 2018). This form of racism has historically impacted Asian Americans, particularly during periods of national distress such as the Great Depression. During this time, the Social Security Act of 1935 was implemented to provide aid to the impoverished; however, it systematically excluded Asian Americans and other people of color from receiving benefits (Archer et al., 2010). This exclusion was not merely an oversight but a reflection of deeper racial prejudices embedded within the U.S. welfare system, illustrating how institutional mechanisms can perpetuate racial inequities. Moreover, the segregation of educational facilities further exemplified institutionalized racism. In 1859, a private school was established exclusively for Chinese children in San Francisco, a move that physically and symbolically separated Chinese children from their white counterparts. This segregation escalated when, on October 11, 1906, the San Francisco Board of Education rebranded this institution as the "Public Oriental School," mandating not only Chinese but also Japanese and Korean children to attend. This policy reinforced the portrayal of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, a stereotype that has long undermined their claims to citizenship and belonging (Lee, 2022).

In summary, the challenges of living as a second-class citizen manifest profoundly in one's quality of life, particularly affecting access to education and employment opportunities. The experience of being an immigrant in Elemental City serves as a poignant allegory for the historical and ongoing struggles faced by Chinese immigrants in the United States. These immigrants often find themselves excluded from employment in governmental sectors due to systemic barriers and discriminatory policies. Consequently, many are compelled to establish their businesses as a means of livelihood. Moreover, the lack of access to proper education further compounds these challenges, forcing Chinese immigrant parents to rely on familial and community resources to educate their children. This reliance often channels the younger generation into continuing family businesses, potentially limiting their exposure to broader educational and career opportunities. As a result, the inherent talents and potential of Chinese immigrant children may remain unrecognized and underutilized, perpetuating a cycle of limited social mobility and economic advancement.

C. Forbidding Racial Mixing

When immigrant groups migrate to new regions, they introduce a diverse array of languages, values, norms, traditions, and lifestyles, all of which present challenges to the dynamics of intercultural communication (Simbolon,

Ummanah, & Iswadi, 2023). The adaptation process is complicated by the barriers they encounter, including systemic discrimination. One of the most profound forms of discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants in the U.S. has been not only geographical isolation but also legal barriers to interracial marriage. These prohibitions were institutionalized within American regulations, further marginalizing Chinese communities. The regulation, coupled with strict traditional Chinese customs regarding women, severely limited the immigration of Chinese women to the U.S. In 1860, women constituted only 5% of the Chinese population in America. This gender imbalance left Chinese men with few options but to seek partners outside their community if they wished to establish families (Fish, 2017). This situation was exacerbated by a longstanding cultural and legal taboo against interracial marriage in the U.S., a legacy of the broader prohibitions of such unions during the era of slavery. Historical records show that between 1850 and 1950, fifteen states passed legislation explicitly banning marriage between Chinese and white individuals. However, the narrative began to shift with the implementation of the “War Brides Act” in the mid-20th century, which allowed American soldiers stationed in Asia during and after World War II to bring their foreign brides to America. This act did not impose the restrictions typically associated with racial quotas or marital laws of the time. Among these brides, approximately 6,000 were Chinese, alongside significant numbers from Japan, the Philippines, and Korea (Knoll, 1982).

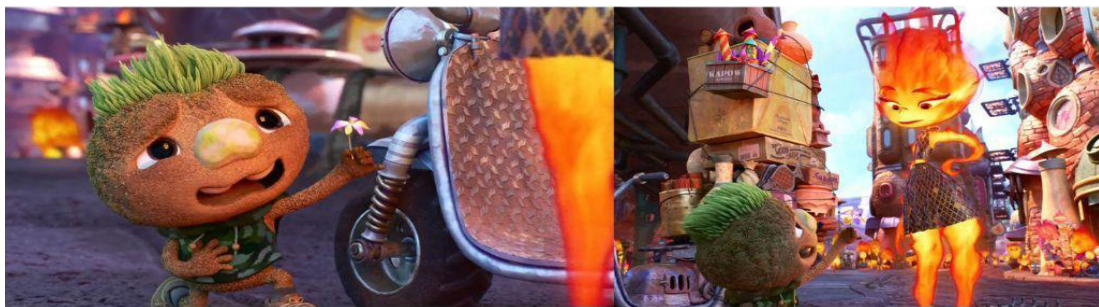


Fig. 7. How Ember stated her views on inter-mixed elements to Klod, the earth element kid
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

In Figure 7 of *Elemental*, a nuanced scene unfolds where Klod, a child of the earth element, attempts to court Ember, a fire element. Ember’s firm rejection of Klod’s advances is rooted in her assertion that “elements don’t mix,” highlighting a deep-seated cultural divide. This interaction is charged with symbolic significance when contextualized within the film’s allegorical framework, where the fire element represents Chinese immigrants, and the earth element, assuming the role of white Americans, represents the dominant societal group. Ember’s caution to Klod about not being seen near her family’s shop by her father further emphasizes the societal and familial pressures that discourage such inter-elemental (or interracial) interactions. This scene captures a vivid portrayal of the historical and cultural texts that have long forbidden interracial relationships between Chinese immigrants and white Americans. It echoes the broader social and legal prohibitions that were historically placed on such unions in the United States, as previously discussed.



Fig. 8. Despite the ban from her father for Wade to enter their shop, Ember continuously meets Wade outside and ends up loving him
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

Wade, originating from a water element family, is depicted as belonging to a privileged and high-status group, as portrayed in Figure 8. This depiction highlights that water elements enjoy access to higher education, a wide array of career options, and a lenient parenting style that encourages children to pursue their aspirations freely. In stark contrast, Ember, representing the fire element akin to Chinese immigrants, faces severe socio-economic constraints. Her family, residing on the outskirts of the city, mirrors the struggles of Chinese immigrants historically confined to areas like Chinatowns—localized, marginalized communities formed as a result of both external impositions and internal community solidarity. This environmental setting has a profound impact on the dynamics of interracial marriage among Chinese immigrants. The concentrated Chinese communities often result in reduced rates of interracial marriages due to the social and economic barriers that limit interactions with other groups. However, as Chinese immigrants ascend the socio-economic ladder, they tend to move away from these enclaves towards city centers or other affluent parts of the U.S., seeking better opportunities and integrating more with other communities (Wong, 1989). This geographical mobility facilitates greater interaction across racial lines, thereby increasing the likelihood of interracial marriages, while concurrently reducing the frequency of ingroup marriages. Moreover, Lauren Davenport's research underscores the complex perceptions surrounding mixed-race identities and their implications in socio-political contexts. For instance, in academic settings like scholarship applications, mixed-race individuals with one white parent often face unique challenges; they are not always recognized as belonging fully to any minority group, which can affect their eligibility for minority-specific resources (Davenport, 2020).

In the film *Elemental*, Ember's relationship with Wade becomes a pivotal narrative arc that significantly influences her personal development and views on her own identity and autonomy. Although there is no explicit legal restriction against inter-element relationships in *Elemental City*, Ember's relationship with Wade faces considerable resistance from her family, reflecting the societal and cultural hurdles that often accompany such unions. The eventual acceptance of Wade by Ember's parents symbolizes a reconciliation of these conflicting values and a hopeful narrative of cultural integration and acceptance. The upcoming findings on Chinese parenting styles and their impacts on Chinese immigrant children will likely delve deeper into how these cultural practices influence child-rearing and the developmental outcomes of children.

D. The Filial-Piety Children

In Old Chinatown, deep community bonds serve both as a support system and a mechanism of social control for Chinese families. Zhou (2009) describes how every Chinese individual in these neighborhoods relies heavily on their community for social, economic, and emotional support. This interconnectedness extends beyond biological ties, as children often grow up under the supervision of community "uncles" and "grandfathers" who, despite having no blood relation, play significant roles in their lives due to established relationships of family friendship or parental acquaintance. This tight-knit community structure also imposes behavioral expectations and social labeling on children. The second generation of Chinese immigrants, in particular, is scrutinized and categorized. Those who are perceived as loyal, obedient (*guai*), and promising (*you-chu-xi*) are labeled as "good" children, while those seen as rude or failing to meet community standards (*bai-jia-zi* for failing family and *mei-chu-xi* for useless) are labeled as "bad" children. These labels not only reflect community values but also influence the self-perception and social identity of the children. Furthermore, due to the economic necessity for both parents to work, many children in Chinatown are raised by individuals who are not their direct relatives. This communal child-rearing approach underscores the adage that "it takes a village to raise a child," particularly in immigrant communities where extended family and close friends play crucial roles in childcare. This system prevents many children from being left alone after school, providing a network of care and supervision.

The "Tiger Mom" stereotype has become a popular yet controversial depiction of Chinese parenting within American cultural discourse. Initially popularized by Amy Chua in her 2011 book, this stereotype portrays Chinese mothers as controlling, assertive, and often harsh, focusing intensely on academic and extracurricular achievement (Chua, 2011). This depiction has not only captured the public imagination but has also been the subject of criticism and scrutiny, particularly from researchers of Asian descent. Dooley (2018) expresses concern that the "Tiger Mom" stereotype overly generalizes Chinese parenting styles and fails to account for the diversity within these families, including the roles fathers play in "tiger parenting." This broad characterization overlooks the nuances of individual parenting approaches and the variability across different Chinese households. Further critique comes from Scarlett Wang, who argues that the American perspective on the "Tiger Mom" uses U.S. cultural beliefs about child-rearing to interpret—and often judge—parenting practices in Chinese communities (Wang, 2013). From this viewpoint, the stereotype serves not only as a misrepresentation but also as a tool for cultural comparison, positioning American parenting styles as "progressive" and framing Chinese methods as "old-fashioned."



Fig. 9. The advice given by Ember's father and mother reflects their hopes for how Ember will grow up to be
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

The “Tiger Mom” stereotype is vividly exemplified in the depiction of Ember’s parents in *Elemental*, as illustrated in **Figure 9**. Ember’s father is portrayed as a figure molding his daughter into a person who is calm and capable of building relationships with customers, with the promise that she will one day inherit and run the family shop. Conversely, Ember’s mother, who engages in paganism to determine the compatibility of couples, is shown to be deeply invested in orchestrating her daughter’s personal life, specifically aiming to find Ember a “suitable” soul mate from within their element—another manifestation of controlling parenting practices. The portrayal of Ember’s mother, who prohibits couples from showing affection in front of her until they are married, further underscores the traditional, and somewhat old-fashioned, approach to parenting and social conduct.

The narrative also touches on the broader aspirations and challenges of immigrant families, particularly those with children born in the United States. Zhou (2009) notes that these families often focus on three primary goals: owning their home, becoming their own bosses, and sending their children to Ivy League schools. This targeted form of acculturation is aimed solely at achieving these objectives, often neglecting broader integration into American society. However, the children of these families, like Ember, often harbor desires to forge their own paths and fully embrace their American identity. Ember’s encounter with Wade, a water element, catalyzes her realization that there is more to life than inheriting her father’s shop. Her exposure to Wade’s artistically inclined family, who appreciate her talent for glass crafting, awakens her to her potential and desires beyond the confines of her community and family expectations.

In Chinese culture, the principle of filial piety forms the foundation of familial relationships, embodying a profound moral duty that children owe to their parents. This concept, deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese values, emphasizes that children’s primary responsibility is to honor and repay their parents for their upbringing, often by subordinating personal desires to meet parental expectations and demands, irrespective of their reasonableness (Yeh & Bedford, 2004). This cultural mandate extends beyond mere respect and obedience, permeating every aspect of family life and individual behavior. Within the traditional Chinese family structure, there is scant tolerance for individualism. The family operates as a cohesive unit where each member’s actions directly impact the collective honor and reputation of the family. This dynamic places a significant burden on parents to cultivate behaviors and practices in their children that uphold family dignity and societal respect (Zhou, 2009).

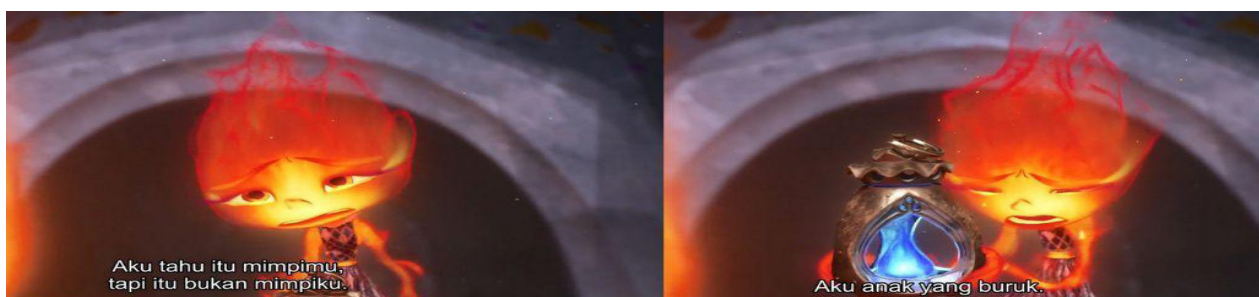


Fig. 10. Ember telling her father that her dream is not taking over her dad’s store
Source: Compiled by researchers from Hotstar.com (2023)

In the climactic scene of *Elemental* depicted in **Figure 10**, Ember is confronted with a poignant dilemma: rescue Wade or safeguard the blue flame, a cherished family heirloom symbolizing her family's heritage and identity. This heirloom passed down through generations, embodies the legacy of the fire element originating from their homeland. Faced with the flood and ensuing chaos, Ember makes the heart-wrenching decision to let Wade, who becomes trapped, "evaporate" to save the heirloom. This decision brings Ember to a critical self-realization. She confronts her father, expressing that the life path he envisioned for her—taking over the family shop—is not her aspiration. This confession labels her as a "bad daughter" in her own eyes, reflecting the deep-seated cultural values of filial piety where deviating from parental expectations is akin to sin. However, this act of self-assertion also marks a significant departure from traditional norms, showcasing a form of individualism that is often suppressed in her community.

Despite these challenges, the narrative progresses to a resolution where Ember's parents ultimately support her decision to pursue her own dreams alongside Wade. This development represents a transformative moment not only for Ember but also for her family and, by extension, the broader community's perception of "bad" children (*bai-jia-zi*), who are typically viewed as those failing to uphold family honor and expectations. In the broader societal context of Elemental City, where fire elements are treated as second-class citizens, the aspirations of children like Ember are often stifled, confined to the realms of their immediate neighborhoods and family businesses. The prevailing narrative restricts these children to roles that perpetuate the status quo, limiting their potential for personal growth and broader societal contributions. Ember's story, however, illustrates a break from these constraints. Her decision to prioritize her own dreams over familial expectations challenges the entrenched stereotypes and cultural norms. This act of defiance not only alters her path but also sets a precedent for other children in similar situations, inspiring them to reconsider their roles and the possibilities beyond the traditionally imposed boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This research underscores the media's role in portraying the nuanced struggles of immigrants, particularly those attempting to maintain their cultural identities while adapting to a new environment. As the second-largest immigrant group in the U.S. after Latinos, Chinese Americans have been prominently represented in major media, including Disney. The animated film *Elemental* serves as an allegory for the historical and cultural experiences of Chinese immigrants in the United States, blending elements of their past and present struggles with identity and acceptance. The film's narrative, though less sinister than past depictions, still perpetuates certain stereotypes and myths about Chinese immigrants. Historical propaganda like the "Yellow Peril," which painted Chinese immigrants as dangerous, has left a lasting imprint on the American subconscious, influencing how Chinese immigrants are perceived today. This portrayal is mirrored in the depiction of the fire people in *Elemental*, who are likened to the feared and marginalized Chinese immigrants of the 1800s.

The systemic discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants is well-documented and was institutionalized through various laws and policies that effectively kept them as second-class citizens. These measures prevented them from accessing education and career opportunities, solidifying their status as perpetual foreigners in American society. This government-sanctioned isolation led to self-imposed segregation within the Chinese community, further entrenching the notion that racial groups should remain separate, thus exacerbating racial tensions and marginalization. Additionally, the traditional Chinese parenting style, characterized by the values of collectivism and filial piety, often results in children sacrificing their individualism to fulfill their parents' dreams. This communal approach to child-rearing reinforces community values but may limit personal development and individual identity formation.

For future research, analyzing the depiction of Chinese immigrants in *Elemental* could provide insights into how immigration policies might be better shaped to protect and uphold the rights of all immigrants, not just those from China. This analysis could also explore the everyday forms of discrimination that these policies should aim to counteract, ensuring that immigrants are not ostracized but instead integrated into society. This study also opens the door to examining how the portrayal of Chinese immigrants in mainstream media, like Disney films, influences public perceptions and understanding of this community's historical and current realities. The presence of ethnically diverse narratives in mainstream media could eventually transform societal views about marginalized groups, challenging long-standing stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive understanding of cultural diversity. By highlighting these themes, the research not only contributes to academic discourse but also suggests practical implications for policy-making and societal attitudes toward immigrants and marginalized communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research benefited immensely from the unwavering support of the Department of Communication Sciences at Universitas Ciputra Surabaya. Sincere gratitude is extended to the entire research team, whose dedication and tireless efforts were instrumental in bringing this manuscript to completion. Their commitment to advancing our understanding through this research has been invaluable, and their contributions are deeply appreciated.

REFERENCES

- Bernal, D. R., Misiyasze, K. H., Ayala, J., & Kenley, N. (2022). Second-class citizens? Subjective social status, acculturative stress, and immigrant well-being. *SN Social Sciences*, 2(96). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-022-00371-2>
- Berger, A. A. (2018). *Media analysis techniques*. (6th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc. ISBN: 9781506366203
- Bertin, É. (2023). The Post-visual Moment: Towards a New Semiotic Economy of Visibility. *ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies* 16(32): 127-147. <https://doi.org/10.21409/OJWP-ZQ12>
- Chua, A. (2011). *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. New York: Penguin Books. ISBN 9780143120582
- Chun, C. W. (2020). The return of the ‘Yellow Peril.’ *Language, Culture and Society*, 2(2), 252–259. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lcs.00029.chu>
- Davenport, L. D. (2020). The fluidity of racial classifications. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1), 221–240. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-060418-042801>
- Dooley, M. W. (2018). Fresh Off the Boat: Dispeller of Chinese American Stereotypes?. *應用英語期刊*, (13), 29-68. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail?DocID=P20110704003-201812-201903190016-201903190016-29-68>
- Elemental (2023) IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15789038/>
- Fish, E. (2017, January 10). *How Mixed Chinese-Western Couples Were Treated A Century Ago*. Retrieved from Asia Society: <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/how-mixed-chinese-western-couples-were-treated-century-ago>
- Foner, N. (2009). *Across Generations: Immigrant Families in America*. New York: New York University. ISBN-10 0814727719
- Hardeman, R. R., Murphy, K. A., Karbeah, J., & Kozhimannil, K. B. (2018). Naming Institutionalized Racism in the Public Health Literature: A Systematic Literature Review. *Public health reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974)*, 133(3), 240–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354918760574>
- Kim, J. Y., & Kesari, A. (2021). Misinformation and hate speech: the case of Anti-Asian hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Online Trust & Safety*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v1i1.13>
- Knoll, T. (1982). *Becoming Americans*. OR: Coast to Coast Books. ISBN-10 0960266445
- Kraut, R., & Skultety, S. (2005). *Aristotle's Politics: Critical Essays*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc. ISBN 9780742534230
- Kumaradjaja, L., & Kumaradjaja, C. (2024). Marion Evelyn Hong before and after the Curse of the Quon Gwon (1916). *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. 1-19 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2023.2292462>
- Lee, J. (2022). Return of the Yellow Peril? Racism, Xenophobia, and Bigotry Against Asian Americans. *Bridgewater Review*, 40(2), 7-10. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol40/iss2/5
- Lyman, S. M. (2000). The “Yellow Peril” Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 13(4), 683–747. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20020056>
- Nadeau, B. L., Liakos, C., Colliva, C., & Braithwa, S. (2023, September 15). *7,000 people arrive on Italian island of 6,000 as migrant crisis overwhelms Lampedusa*. Retrieved from CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/15/europe/italy-lampedusa-migrant-crisis-intl/index.html>
- Paché, G. (2022). Woke Culture Syndrome: Is research in management under threat? *Journal of Management Research*, 14(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jmr.v14i1.19323>
- PBS. (2008). *History Detectives: Extended Interview - Chinese Immigration* [Video]. PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/video/history-detectives-extended-interview-chinese-immigration/>
- Pilkington, H. (2016). 6 ‘Second-class citizens’: Reordering privilege and prejudice. In *Loud and proud: Passion and politics in the English Defence League* (pp. 154-176). Manchester: Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526114013.00015>
- Putra, F. D., Cangara, H., & Ullah, H. (2022). Memes as a symbol of political communication. *CHANNEL: Jurnal Komunikasi*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.12928/channel.v10i1.22326>
- Salim, M., Wibowo, A. A., & Hariyanti, N. (2023). Kajian Kebijakan Komunikasi Kesehatan Global Terkait Vaksinasi COVID-19. In *Komunikasi dan Isu Global Kontemporer* (pp. 83-98). Penerbit Samudra Biru. ISBN: 978-623-261-557-1
- Simbolon, M., Ummanah, U., & Iswadi, I. (2023). Harmonious Coexistence: Intercultural Communication Dynamics Between Legal Immigrants and Residents in Gading Serpong. *CHANNEL: Jurnal Komunikasi*, 11(2), 172–177. <https://doi.org/10.12928/channel.v11i2.455>
- Sobur, A. (2017). *Semiotika Komunikasi*. Bandung: PT. Remaja Rosdakarya. ISBN: 979692238X
- Thompson, D. (2023, September 22). *Disney Issues Statement on Elemental Streaming Viewership Following ‘Flop’*

- Reports*. Retrieved from The Direct: <https://thedirect.com/article/elemental-disney-flop-streaming>
- Wang, H. (2012). Portrayals of Chinese women's images in Hollywood mainstream film: An analysis of four representative films of different periods. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 21(3), 82-91.
- Wang, S. (2013). The "Tiger Mom": Stereotypes of Chinese Parenting in the United States. *Applied Psychology OPUS*. Retrieved from https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych_opus/the-tiger-mom-stereotypes-of-chinese-parenting-in-the-united-states/
- Weik, T. (2020, June 10). *The history behind 'Yellow Peril Supports Black Power' and why some find it problematic* . Retrieved from NBC News: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/history-behind-yellow-peril-supports-black-power-why-some-find-n1228776>
- White, C. (2023, July 6). *10 years later, Pope Francis' Lampedusa 'cry' offers renewed call to welcome migrants*. Retrieved from NCR Online: <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/10-years-later-pope-francis-lampedusa-cry-offers-renewed-call-welcome-migrants>
- Wong, M. G. (1989). A look at intermarriage among the Chinese in United States in 1980. *Sociological Perspective*, 32(1), 87-107. DOI: 10.2307/1389009
- Wu, L., & Nguyen, N. (2022). From Yellow Peril to Model Minority and Back to Yellow Peril. *AERA Open*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211067796>
- Yeh, K.-H., & Bedford, O. (2004). Filial belief and parent-child conflict. *International Journal of Psychology*, 39(2), 132–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207590344000312>
- Zhou, M. (2009). Conflict, Coping, and Reconciliation: Intergenerational Relations in Chinese Immigrant Families. In N. Foner, *Across Generations: Immigrant Families in America* (pp. 21-46). New York and London: New York University. ISBN-10: 0814727719