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NAVIGATING ADOLESCENT IDENTITY FORMATION IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT: A STUDY OF SEAN WANG'S *DÌDI (弟弟)*

Dela Julia Ananta
English Studies Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran
E-mail: dela23001@mail.unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT. The surrounding sociocultural environment plays a big role in the identity formation that occurs in adolescence. Navigating adolescence and forming an identity can be challenging, particularly for immigrants who are exposed to two or more different cultural influences. This qualitative study, conducted using descriptive analysis method, applies psychosocial development theory as an approach to explore how Sean Wang depicted the challenges that adolescents with cross-cultural identity must face in the process of identity formation as represented by a Taiwanese-American adolescent in the film *Dìdi* (2024). The analysis proves that in the process of his identity formation, Chris faces numerous challenges tied to his identity as an immigrant, such as the dominant majority's views and discrimination that lead to internalized racism and family cultural values that are not in line with his personal aspirations. The present study argues that understanding the effects of cross-cultural identity on adolescents' identity formation and how the process is represented in film can serve as a supportive medium for other adolescents with cross-cultural identities in navigating their adolescence in a positive direction.

Keywords: Adolescent, Cross-cultural identity, Film, Identity Formation, Immigrant

MENAVIGASI PEMBENTUKAN IDENTITAS REMAJA DALAM KONTEKS LINTAS BUDAYA: SEBUAH STUDI TENTANG FILM *DÌDI (弟弟)* KARYA SEAN WANG

ABSTRAK. Lingkungan sosial budaya di sekitar memainkan peran besar dalam pembentukan identitas yang terjadi pada masa remaja. Menavigasikan masa remaja dan membentuk identitas secara bersamaan dapat menjadi tantangan tersendiri, terutama bagi para imigran yang terpapar pada dua atau lebih pengaruh budaya yang berbeda. Penelitian Kualitatif yang dilakukan degan menggunakan metode analisis deskriptif ini menggunakan teori perkembangan psikososial sebagai pendekatan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana Sean Wang menggambarkan tantangan yang harus dihadapi oleh remaja dengan identitas lintas budaya dalam proses pembentukan identitas yang direpresentasikan oleh seorang karakter remaja Taiwan-Amerika dalam film *Dìdi* (2024). Analisis membuktikan bahwa dalam proses pembentukan identitasnya, Chris menghadapi berbagai tantangan yang terkait dengan identitasnya sebagai seorang imigran, seperti pandangan mayoritas dominan dan diskriminasi yang mengarah pada rasisme yang terinternalisasi dan nilai-nilai budaya keluarga yang tidak sejalan dengan aspirasi pribadinya. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa memahami dampak dari identitas lintas budaya terhadap pembentukan identitas remaja dan bagaimana proses tersebut direpresentasikan dalam film dapat menjadi media yang mendukung bagi remaja dengan identitas lintas budaya lainnya untuk menjalani masa remajanya ke arah yang positif.

Kata-kata kunci: Remaja, Identitas Lintas Budaya, Film, Pembentukan Identitas, Imigran

INTRODUCTION

Along with the influences of the surrounding environments, the media plays a critical role in the process of identity formation. How society views particular groups in which an individual belongs can shape individual perceptions about him/herself that will further form their identity. (Besana et al., 2019) Therefore, representation of certain groups in mass media such as film can help individuals form his/her self-identity.

A coming-of-age film is specifically chosen as the representation of adolescent groups or those who are aged between 12 and 20 (Doherty & Doherty, 2010), as the current study will focus on analyzing the process of identity formation in adolescence. According to Berghahn (2010), this genre of film is characterized by the portrayal of a generic understanding of adolescence, such as the role played by adolescents, particular generational conflicts, and youth rebellions. More than the representation of groups with a certain age range, the representation of people who are marginalized (those with race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation differences with the majority group) is more important to emphasize.

Despite being the fastest-growing racial group in the United States and contributing to 7% of its population with over 24 million people (Census, 2022), from 1993 until 2018, Asian-Americans in American cinema were still underrepresented, with just 14 characters playing the lead roles (Besana et al., 2019). However, in the last five years, several films with Asian-American centered themes and roles, such as *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), *Past Lives* (2023), and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of Ten Rings* (2021) gained abundant popularity and achieved success by receiving several prestigious awards.

On par to the previously mentioned films, *Dìdi (弟弟),* directed and written by Sean Wang, was also nominated and won numerous awards as an independent film (IMDb, 2024). *Dìdi (弟弟)* explores adolescence through the perspective of an adolescent named Chris, who comes from a Taiwanese-American family, amidst multicultural influences and how that multicultural influences mixed with other adolescence's challenges and play critical role in the process of Chris' identity formation.

Erikson (1950) stated that adolescence is a period in which "identity crisis" is even more prominent than at any other time in a lifetime. Erikson further explained that the word "crisis" in this context is not particularly in a negative connotation, but rather referring to a necessary turning point that marks where individuals should shift the direction of their development process as a human being. Concisely, adolescence is the most instrumental period in the process of identity formation. The process of identity formation is particularly challenging for adolescents within cross-cultural identity, as they have to face diverse influences and interactions that, with the passage of time, can shape an individual's identity as a whole. In a multicultural environment, individuals are exposed to multiple cultural frameworks with different moral values and beliefs that eventually lead to the fluid process of identity formation.

As the film *Dìdi (弟弟)* is a relatively new released film back in 2024, there has been no research conducted with this film by Sean Wang as the object of research. Nonetheless, the representation of adolescents with cross-

cultural identity is not something new in American cinemas, in the previous study conducted by Attiba (2024), the researcher analyzed the journey of the protagonist in the film *Turning Red* as she navigates and ultimately accepts her identity after the process of identity formation during adolescence as an immigrant. Besana et al., (2019)analyzed Asian-American representation in media and how this representation may affect identity formation in Asian American adolescents, as well as how it influences interaction between social groups. Several studies regarding cross-cultural adolescents and their relationships with their surroundings have been conducted, such as the research by Rick & Forward (1992) that examines the connection between acculturation and intergenerational differences among Hmong refugee families from the perspective of Hmong adolescents, Ting-Toomey (1981) that conducted an empirical study to study the pattern of close friendship communication in Chinese-American students, and how those patterns relate to their ethnic identity, and the last study is conducted by Kiang et al., (2011) that examined Asian-American adolescents preferences in choosing friends and the reason underlying that preferences.

Although the research by Attiba (2024) is almost identical to the present research, since the object of research and gender of the protagonist are different, needless to say that the result will also be different. While the study by Besana et al., (2019) is more focused on the representation of Asian-American and not on the identity formation process of the cross-cultural adolescent. The other three studies only examined the relationship that might be formed during identity formation.

In the present study, the researcher will examine how cross-cultural identity is affecting the protagonist's interaction with his environment, such as peers and family, and how the results of that interaction might affect the process of his identity formation.

To emphasize the importance of the representation of marginalized adolescents in the coming-of-age framework through Sean Wang's *Dìdi (弟弟),* the current study will analyze how Chris is negotiating his identity as Taiwanese-American through thoughts, behaviors, and social interactions, and also further examine the role of family and peers in individual's identity formation.

METHOD

To examine the construction of cross-cultural adolescent identity in Sean Wang's *Dìdi (弟弟)*, this study adopts a close textual and visual analysis framework, focusing on characterization, dialogue, plot, setting, and cinematography. Preliminary close observation of the film was conducted to trace how these cinematic elements work in tandem to represent the protagonist's identity formation process.

Rather than treating theoretical perspectives as isolated lenses, the research establishes a dialogue between developmental psychology and postcolonial cultural theory. The central analytical bridge connects Erik H. Erikson's (1950) framework of psychosocial development—specifically the adolescent crisis of "role confusion"—with Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) spatialized concept of hybridity and "the Third Space." In this synthesis, Erikson's internal developmental friction of role confusion is not viewed merely as an intrapsychic phase, but as a condition that is externally exacerbated, negotiated, and spatialized within Bhabha's Third Space. The protagonist's psychological disorientation and unstable ego boundaries during adolescence become acutely heightened in the ambivalent, in-between cultural borders of the Third Space, where traditional familial expectations and immigrant assimilation pressures collide.

To support this central bridge, the theoretical framework incorporates complementary dimensions of identity negotiation: Stuart Hall's (1989) theory of cultural identity to map the fluidity of cross-cultural representation; Henri Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory to evaluate the protagonist's shifting sense of ingroup and outgroup belonging; and Kurt Lewin's (1948) framework on minority self-alienation to unpack moments of ethnic indifference or internalized friction.

The analytical discussion operationalizes these synthesized theories through close readings of key cinematic excerpts, evaluating how Wang's formal choices—such as framing, pacing, and *mise-en-scène*—visually capture the protagonist's navigation of role confusion within the cultural negotiations of the Third Space.

The analytical discussion bridges the psychological and cultural frameworks with contemporary film theory—specifically drawing upon formalist film analysis and Bordwell's (2008) principles of cinematic narration—to examine how visual and narrative structures externalize the protagonist's internal conflicts. Rather than treating cinematic devices as mere illustrations of literary or psychological concepts, the analysis investigates specific technical dimensions of cinematography:

- Framing and aspect ratio: How camera framing (such as tight, claustrophobic close-ups versus detached wide shots) constructs spatial confinement and mirrors the protagonist's ego diffusion and role confusion within the Third Space.
- Camera movement and point-of-view (POV): Handheld tracking shots and subjective camera angles that register the kinetic instability, adolescent restlessness, and psychological disorientation of the protagonist's peer interactions.
- *Mise-en-scène* and lighting: The use of domestic interiors, transitional public spaces (such as suburban streets and skateparks), and color palettes to symbolize cultural liminality and the psychological friction between immigrant heritage and assimilation pressures.

Relevant scene excerpts and audiovisual cues are closely examined to demonstrate how Sean Wang's formal choices actively construct—rather than simply reflect—the cross-cultural identity formation process theorized by Erikson, Bhabha, Hall, Tajfel, and Lewin.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Balancing Boyhood Between Two Cultures

Like many boys his age who are undergoing the process of identity formation, 13-year-old Christopher Wang strives to engage in multiple experiences he considers 'cool' while also struggling to keep his 'uncool' side buried within him. Several actions that the boy in that summer of 2008 considers 'cool' are: skateboarding, using obscene words, tossing sexist and homophobic jokes, filming with his camera, uploading nonsense videos to YouTube, and surfing the internet. Meanwhile, what he considers 'uncool' are the fact that he is not as unemotional as he believes himself to be, and being Asian.

Born as the third generation of a Taiwanese immigrant family raised in America, Chris often finds himself feeling a sense of inferiority because of his Asian identity. According to Lewin (1948) self-Hatred among underprivileged groups, such as immigrants, is a common phenomenon. Chris believes that his identity as a part of the ethnic group is an obstacle that is blocking his way to being accepted by his friends. This might lead him to distance himself from anything related to the group and will try to not showing the behavior, habit, and appearance that are 'too Asian'

(Lewin, 1948). Lewin further explains that the reason why someone distancing himself from his ethnic group could happen either because he dislike particular elements in the group or because they are more interested in other groups, and in Chris's case it is because he is more interested in American cultures; skateboarding, pop punk music, the way he dressed. However, it is not solely his interest towards the American culture that made the researcher state that Chris hates his identity as an Asian, but also, in several scenes in the movie, it was apparent how Chris is trying to hide his identity in order to be accepted by his friends. Just like in the scene where he is trying to be the center of attention in his American skateboarder friend's party with swallowing a roach of cigarettes—an action called Wu-Tanging—and his friends are praising him while shouting "Asian Chris!", which then he corrected to "Half-Asian." (1:03:43).

Besides from showing how he is trying hard to be accepted and acknowledged, the scene also shows how Chris is claiming to be half-Asian when he is, in fact, fully Asian; his claim later gets debunked when his friends find out that his parents are both Asian. In other scenes, Chris also showing a sign of embarrassment towards his mother's action that he thinks "so Asian," such as eating burger neatly using knife and fork (48:42) or using umbrella when it is hot outside (25:23). The behavior shown by Chris is indicating "Ethnic denial", a term which Driedger (1976) used to describe inferior and restricted feelings, resentment towards the ethnic group's members, also the feeling of need to hide his ethnic identity. Besana et al., (2019) added that the lack of a sense of belongingness towards his ethnic group might be further intensified by the discrimination that some Asian-Americans received, which can create a feeling of rejection from the dominant group. In several scenes, it was disclosed that Chris is also one of the Asian-Americans who receives prejudice, discrimination, and racism. As it was shown in the minutes 19:43, when a white boy is mocking him in a racist way as a call for a fight, also when the girl he likes says "you're pretty cute for an Asian." (37:35).

According to Lewin (1948), an individual's background, such as a particular social group in which they belong, serves as a foundation that shapes the ideas and attitudes they hold, which, more or less, determines where they need to stand in certain situations and further defines their behavior in the said situations. Lewin also stated that when an individual is trying to cross the border from one group into another group, the uncertainty of belonging to either group may be formed, which then manifests through one's behavior as self-consciousness, restraints, and a tendency to overreact.

Having to grow up in the diverse land of America with his cross-cultural identity, Chris is not exactly great at this balancing game. Moreover, his cross-cultural identity involves two contrasting cultures, Chinese or Asian in general, which emphasizes collectivity, responsibility, filial piety, deference, and dependence (Ting-Toomey, 1981), and American or Caucasian in general, which values individualism, independence, egalitarianism, self-reliance, and assertiveness (Connor, 1977). In most scenes in the film where Chris has to mingle with his friends, particularly his skateboarder friends who are Americans (two White and one Black friend), there is an apparent hint of discomfort due to self-consciousness that often causes him to both restrain himself or respond with exaggerated actions as how it was shown in the scene where Chris and his skateboarder friends flee from a security guard after skateboarding in a restricted area. Chris gives an exaggerated remark after, suggesting that Donovan, his friend, could have punched the guard when

Donovan's intention was more on the thrill of escaping rather than seeking confrontation (55:31). However, the remark was not what Chris exactly had in mind and it is a mere attempt made to fit in to his American friends. The remark does not just appear without any trigger either, as the scene before that one discloses that the remark was made after his observation of his friends' behaviors and attitudes. After the security guard warned them to go, Chris was worried and hesitated to stay and only sure to keep filming his friends skateboarding when they treated the security guard's warning lightly (54:16). With Chris worrying about getting caught in a rule-breaking action and how his American friends are treating the situation and the guard as a joke, the scene suggests that Chris is still influenced by the Chinese cultural norms which emphasizes responsibility and respect for elders (the security guard, in this context), while also trying to fit into the American culture that he mistook his friends' definition of freedom and assertiveness also to include something as extreme as "punched the guard in his face."

Chris's attempt to assimilate with Americans stems from humans' desire to engage in social interaction, and it makes sense that he tries to socialize with his everyday environment instead of with his ethnic group, which he barely meets. Chen & Yang's (1986) research has also shown that such experience is not unique to Chris, as Chinese-American adolescents generally show more similar traits to the American than Chinese adolescents. The tendency to form and maintain belongingness is naturally carved within every human being; belongingness is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Bonding a friendship with peers is usually adolescents' way to fill the void from the need to belong. Besides, friendship can also act as a 'guide' for someone's attitude and behavior that further shapes their identity (Ting-Toomey, 1981). To form a friendship, it is normal for an individual to always look for similar points that they have with others as a base for connectedness (Fiebert & Fiebert, 1969). Therefore, why most of Chris's close friends are Asian, as Ting-Toomey (1981) stated that people with similar ethnic backgrounds will tend to have more similarity in their personality and are usually perceived more positively than people with different ethnic backgrounds. Another reason for this is that the city where Chris lives, Fremont, California, is a culturally diverse region; according to the United States Census Bureau, from 2010 until 2023, more than 40% of the population is foreign-born (*United States Census Bureau*, n.d.). Within this diverse setting, the likelihood of cross-cultural interactions among the minority is increasing. In this context, Arce (1981) also emphasizes that connectedness between minority people with the same background becomes an important aspect in the process of identity formation that can increase one's self-esteem.

Even though Chris's friends are coming from various ethnic groups in Asia that are different from him, with the background similarity they hold, a new identity that can strengthen their bond is formed, creating a barrier between them and people outside of their Asian community (Singh, 1977). But bonding a friendship with Asian-American people does not mean Chris and his friends are far from being influenced by American cultures, norms, and values. Besides the environment's vital role in adolescents' identity formation, the rise of social media in that early 2000s also plays its role in enforcing shared ideas and images (Besana et al., 2019). The constant exposure to American cultures and values from both offline and online environments might lead Asian-American adolescents to internalize the American values, which is in line with Lewin's (1948) statement that the underprivileged group tends to see

themselves from the perspective of the majority groups, and their opinion is greatly influenced by the dominant majority that holds low esteem for their group. With the internalization of American values, adolescents who tend to be more concerned about people's perspective towards them rather than what they feel about themselves will blend and over-identify themselves with a certain people or group just to be accepted (Erikson, 1950). Erikson comes to the conclusion that when adolescents are unable to arrive at their definition of self and just follow the crowds, they might be losing their identity. According to Erikson, this is the concept of 'Role confusion', which is a conflict that arises within adolescence, the most essential period of identity development.

The Roles of Family Cultural Values In Shaping Adolescents' Identity

Stuart Hall (1989) argued that cultural identity is not merely a matter of 'being' but also a matter of 'becoming', it is a continuous play directed by history, culture, and power. Therefore, instead of just what he was born as, Chris's cultural identity also includes the combined forces that influence him in his current environment; his peers, social media, and the dominant majority's view. However, Chris also does not entirely assimilate himself into the American culture, as he is still showing several signs of adherence to the Chinese cultural norms and beliefs, which is in accord with Singh's (1977) argument that although immigrant groups do not necessarily grasp their origin cultural values, they also do not entirely absorb the dominant cultural system. Singh argued that the immigrant groups' beliefs and values of their traditional culture are modified by the American cultures and norms throughout the time. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) also has the same view about this matter in his concept of hybridity. Bhabha argues that in this modern world, there are 'in-between' spaces which he calls 'the third space' where different cultures are interacting and overlapping with each other, and within these spaces, people have the opportunities to figure out new ways of dealing with society that will further help them form their identities.

The use of English and Mandarin, which are often used interchangeably, especially in scenes set in Chris's family home, is one of the signs that show how Chris and his family are negotiating their identities within the third space. Other signs that show how they are negotiating their identity within the third space are also apparent in Chris's mother, Chungsing's, parental style. For instance, despite pushing Chris to get tutored to improve his academic performance, Chungsing also giving Chris the freedom to pursue his hobby as a film maker and skateboarder, this reflect the overlapping nature of giving academic pressures that are commonly associated with Asian parents while also granting personal freedom, a trait that is more commonly owned by American parents. These parents' stereotype is supported by Hsu (1980) by his statement that Chinese parents lack awareness of the importance of self-expression compared to American parents. Hsu also added that the unawareness of Chinese parents of the importance of self-expression most of the time limits the children's desire to achieve more than what is realistically can be achieved.

The entire differences between Chris's interaction with his family, especially his grandmother, and his interaction with his friends also show a process of identity negotiation within the third space. Chris's tendency to behave as a menace when he mingles with his friends certainly discloses the Americanized side of him, which is a sign of assertiveness (Connor, 1977). Nevertheless, his attachment to Chinese cultural norms remains evident in his behavior, particularly in his compliance with his grandmother, which highlights the traditional Chinese value of filial

piety (Ting-Toomey, 1981). Both Chris's assertive and obedient natures are part of his identity that was formed after undergoing a transformation that transcends time, place, history, and culture (Hsu, 1980). The transformation that affects Chris's identity formation might be partly influenced by how the majority group sees his community and how that results in the need for him to decide on which ethnic label they identify with in certain situations, as stated by Phinney (1990).

The family's role is essential in the process of adolescents' identity formation because the family is typically the first environment that an individual must face, where the individual also needs to build relationships with the family members, and from that experience, there lies a foundation for the process of identity formation (Para, 2008). It is also fit Erikson's (1950) argument that before proceeding further to the process of identity formation, the Family's provision of an individual's needs, such as food and shelter, at an early stage lays the foundation for establishing trust that plays an important role in the identity formation process at later stages. Chris's beliefs and values were first implanted by his family members before he reached the exploration stage, in which he started to blend himself with the mainstream American culture (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

Chris's family is just a regular Asian-American family that lives in a modest home in Fremont, California. While his father is pursuing his career in Taiwan, the responsibility to look after the family (Chris, his sister, and his grandmother) is handed over to Chungsing, his mother. With the absence of Chris's father figure, the family's adherence to the Chinese cultural norms and values primarily comes from the elder figures in the house, who are Chris's grandmother and mother. Chris's grandmother still entirely embraces the traditional cultural values and beliefs, in addition to fully communicating in Mandarin, some of the signs shown by Chris's grandmother include a family-oriented nature, paying attention to her grandchildren's food, and a hint of patriarchal tendencies. Meanwhile, his mother has slightly shifted from the traditional cultural values and beliefs by going back and forth communicating in Mandarin and English, and other signs of the formation of the third space. However, parenting-wise, Chungsing still applies the traditional values and beliefs in taking care of her children by prioritizing the instrumental support in daily and educational needs as a form of love. According to Chao (2001), instead of showing a physical or emotional form of love to their children, Asian parents tend to demonstrate their love by providing their essential needs. Thus, they barely communicate their feelings or views with their children. For Asians, especially Chinese parents, verbal communication does not work both ways and is only used as a medium to instill expectation and teach moral values rather than to discuss with the children, this is contrary to how American parents utilize two-way communication that emphasize self-expression for their children (Wu & Chao, 2011). As a result of this one-way communication parenting style, Chris is facing difficulties in expressing his emotions until the film reaches its climax, in which he and Chungsing starts to talk about their feelings.

CONCLUSION

As a narrative representation of contemporary Asian-American adolescence, Sean Wang's *Dìdi (弟弟)* captures the friction of identity formation when a young individual is caught between contrasting cultural worlds. The film chronicles the journey of its protagonist, Chris Wang—a teenager born into a Taiwanese immigrant family in America—as he attempts to navigate the turbulent waters of adolescence. Rather than experiencing a smooth transition,

Chris falls deeply into the state of "role confusion" as theorized by Erik H. Erikson (1950), struggling to anchor a stable sense of self amidst conflicting cultural expectations. Driven by a desire for peer acceptance within a dominant majority environment, Chris actively internalizes dominant external standards, leading to a temporary rejection of his ethnic heritage and a sense of self-alienation that aligns with Kurt Lewin's (1948) observations on minority self-hatred.

Through the narrative arc, Chris's rejection of his familial ties and his reluctance to embrace his Chinese ethnic background reflect Henri Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory, demonstrating how a lack of perceived ingroup belonging drives adolescents toward compensatory assimilation. However, as Stuart Hall's (1989) model of cultural identity illuminates, identity is never static; it is an ongoing negotiation between "being" and "becoming." The narrative demonstrates that despite Chris's outward alienation and rejection of his roots—manifested in his strained interactions with his mother and grandmother—his heritage is never entirely erased. Intimate narrative moments, such as linguistic switches to Mandarin and familial confrontations, reveal that the cultural values imparted by his family persist beneath the surface.

Ultimately, the film's narrative resolution transcends a binary choice between total assimilation and traditional retention. As Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity suggests, Chris unconsciously constructs a "Third Space"—an ambivalent, in-between zone where Taiwanese immigrant traditions and American adolescent culture overlap and collide. By tracing Chris's narrative trajectory from role confusion to cultural negotiation, *Dìdi* illustrates that cross-cultural adolescent identity is not forged by choosing a single cultural allegiance, but by painfully and continuously negotiating survival within the liminal spaces between them.

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