

A critical semiotic investigation of Asian stereotypes in the short film *Bao*: Implications for classroom practice

Georgina Barton, Nathan Lowien and Yijun Hu*

University of Southern Queensland and *Griffith University

ABSTRACT

*Research in a broad range of disciplines has explored how specific modes of communication can contribute to meaning-making in diverse texts such as picture books, films, short animated features, and to a lesser extent video games. Fields such as literacy, semiotics, and critical communication studies have aimed to reveal different interpretative possibilities expressed through language and image, but to a lesser extent gesture and sound featured in produced narratives. This paper analyses the speechless Oscar winning short film *Bao*, directed and written by Domee Shi and produced by Pixar animation studios. We do so from two perspectives. First, we share intended interpersonal meaning of characters through the multimodal ensembles of gesture, image and sound. Second, we apply a critical multimodal lens to discuss the inclusion of cultural stereotypes by arguing a popularisation of what it means to be Asian. We discuss how these findings are relevant for critical literacy curriculum development and enactment in the classroom.*

Introduction

In recent times, literacy researchers and semioticians have explored how multimodal inter-relations contribute to making meaning, including the representation of characters and settings in picture books, short films, video games and movies (Barton & Unsworth, 2014; Lowien, 2016; Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013; Toh, 2014; Unsworth, 2013a, 2013b). Scholars have found that deliberate choices by text makers such as the use of language, colour, line, shape, and light in image throughout such texts contribute significantly to meaning (Unsworth, 2013a). While there has been some emergent research exploring intermodal relations including Toh's (2014) work that analysed a character's language and gesture, and Noad and Barton's (2020) work that explored speech, intonation, sound, words and image, limited work has been carried out on the modal ensemble of gesture, image and sound. Further, critical analyses of diverse texts by focussing on intermodal relations is in its infancy.

This paper consequently analyses the Oscar winning short film *Bao*, directed and written by Domee Shi

(2018) and produced by Pixar animation studios, through a meta-semiotic lens of modal inter-relations by exploring representational and interpersonal meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) depicted throughout the animated text. We discuss these meanings from a critical multimodal discourse perspective (Djonov & Zhao, 2013; Yu & Yang, 2020) with the aim of revealing cultural stereotypes and innovations, that is, what it means to be Asian in the world of Pixar and Disney. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper we ask: How do the modes of image, gesture and sound interrelate to make meaning in the short film *Bao*? To what extent do these ensembles contribute to the cultural stereotypes for contemporary audiences? And how can this knowledge contribute to teachers' understanding and use of multimodal texts in the classroom?

Multimodal ensembles and meaning-making in diverse texts

An emergence of research in the fields of literacy and semiotics has explored how different modes of communication represent narrative and characterisation

(Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013). For Bezemer and Kress (2008, 2015) a mode is a social resource used to express meaning including images, gestures, sounds and language. When people communicate multimodally they ‘orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes’(Jewitt, 2009, p.15). A multimodal ensemble (Barton, 2018; Butt, 2006) or interaction happens when information is presented through a range of modes and then received by others. This is when modes combined represent ‘what the world is like, how people are socially related and how semiotic entities are connected’(Kress, 2009, p. 79). In relation to diverse texts such as picture books, films, magazines and animations (Ajayi, 2011; Serafini, 2010), scholars have investigated how semiotic entities contribute to different interpretative possibilities, particularly for viewers of such texts (Unsworth, 2013b).

Understanding how the modal choices of authors impact on meaning is important in curriculum and schools for a number of reasons. For example, students can gain higher level skills in identifying the ensembles of modes present in a range of texts which in turn assist them to compose their own texts (Mills, Unsworth, & Barton, 2019). Further, students may acquire the ability to critically discuss what other possibilities would be if, for example, authors represented characters differently through the modes. Other scholars have also found that deeper critical reading of texts can lead to students questioning or challenging specific ideologies and

perspectives authors may make such as social and cultural biases or prejudice (McGlashan & Sunderland, 2015; Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018; Wexler, 2017).

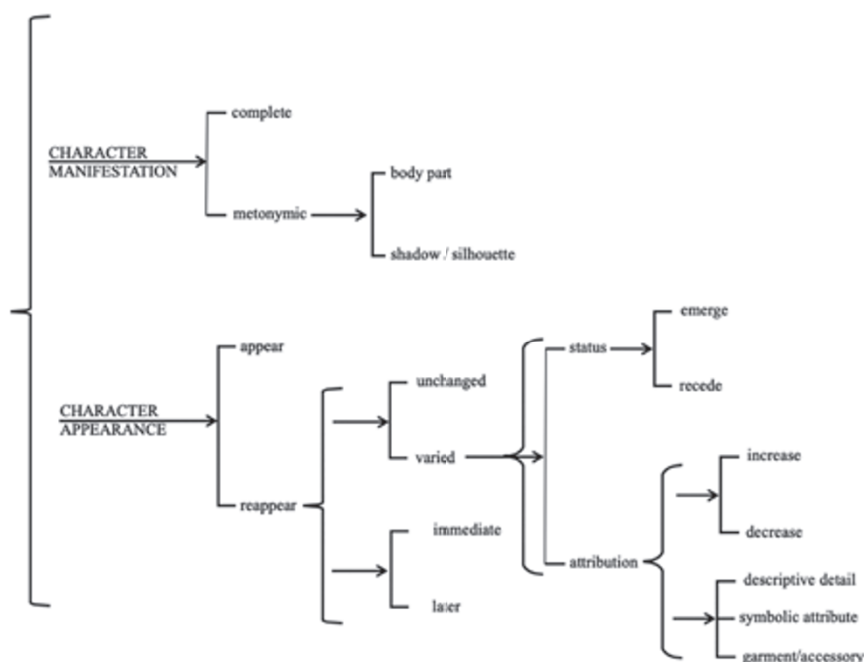
Theoretical framing: Representational and interpersonal meanings in multimodal texts

Critically examining the cultural stereotypes, specifically those related to Asia, in selected scenes from the short film *Bao* will involve a multimodal analysis of representational and interpersonal meanings present in three scenes. First, the representational meaning of each character will be explored by examining visual and gestural modes (Dael, Goudbeek, & Scherer, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Painter et al., 2013). Second, interpersonal meaning as described by Painter et al. (2013) will analyse the influence of music and sound in combination with image and gesture by using modal resources described by Mills, Unsworth and Barton (2019) and Barton and Unsworth (2014). The cultural stereotypes in the representation of Asian-ness will then be illuminated through the inter-modal co-patterning of the representational and interpersonal meanings as revealed through the analysis.

Representational meaning

Character depictions can be considered across two variables, the represented character manifestation, and the appearance of the character throughout the unfolding scene (Painter et al., 2013). They can be depicted with the head and shoulders or head and entire

Figure 1. Character appearance and manifestation (Painter et al., 2013, p. 64)



body of the character. Characters can also be shown through parts of their bodies such as their hands and forearms, a silhouette or casted shadow as well as body movements (Ngo, 2018) and their expressions can be considered in their order of re/appearance in the selected scenes. A character's status considers the emergence of a character in a sequence of images such as their movement from the background to the foreground in a setting or vice versa in an image sequence. In addition, a character's attributes can be varied by either increasing or decreasing the depiction of their details, symbolic attributes, apparel or accessories (Tseng, 2013). Further details are provided in Painter et al's work (2013) as depicted in Figure 1.

Narrative structure

Character actions can be explored through narrative structures. Narrative structures in images can assist in describing how the represented characters in an image act upon each other (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Characters who initiate an action as the agent and a character or object that is the recipient of the action as the goal. Actions in images are represented through vectors or lines that direct a viewer's eye across an image's layout. Vectors can be represented through the gesture of a character such as their hand pointing or eyes gazing towards another character or object. Vectors can represent a transaction between an agent and a goal, by either being unidirectional and traveling in one direction from the agent to the goal or bidirectional and travel from back and forth between the agent and goal such as two characters looking simultaneously at each other (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Vectors can also be non-transactional when they emanate from an agent but do not point towards any specific character or object. When the goal of a vector is directed towards a character or object which in turn uses another emanating vector to represent an action, the act can be described as a conversion as the action has been converted by the receiving and emanating character or object (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Interpersonal meaning

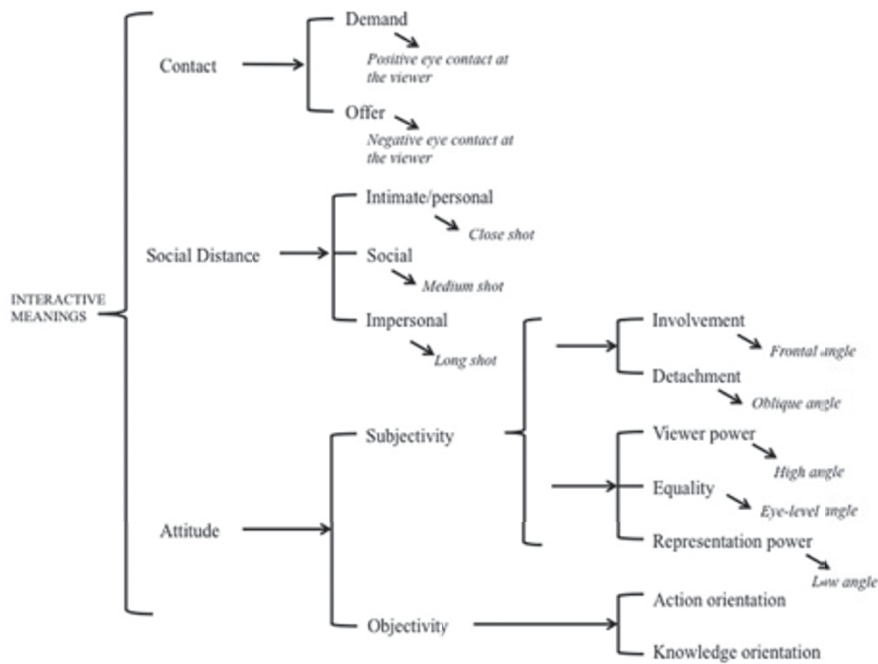
Interpersonal or interactive meaning in images is represented through a character's focalised point of view. It is concerned with the types of relationships formed when viewing an image including the relationship between characters and/or objects and with the audience (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Three variables can be used to describe the interpersonal meaning represented in a text. The first variable is concerned with the type of contact being made between characters in a text, for example if a character is making

positive eye contact with the viewer of the image, it can be said to be demanding the viewer's attention, whereas images in which a character is not making eye contact with a viewer can be described as offering information. The second variable is concerned with the representation of social distance for example images that use close camera frames create an intimate social relationship, images that use a medium camera frame create a social connection and images that use a long-distance frame create an impersonal social distance. The third variable is concerned with the visual attitude represented in an image. This attitude can be objective such as in the use of diagrams and graphs or subjective such as in the use of picture books where particular emotions are depicted (Mills, Unsworth, & Barton, 2019).

Subjective attitude is released through the horizontal and vertical camera placement for example, images that use a frontal angle create an involved connection between the viewer and the represented character however, detached connection is formed through the use of an oblique image. Furthermore, when a high camera angle is used an attitude in which the viewer has power is created, however an attitude in which a viewer is powerless, and the represented character is powerful is created if a low camera angle is utilised. Images that utilise an eye-level angle are said to have an equal power relationship between the represented character and the image viewer. Scholarly work has explored such power relations in regard to gender and sexuality (Gürkan, 2017; Kuhn, 2013) and further detail is provided in Figure 2.

We use this work to analyse selected scenes in *Bao* with the purpose of determining both the representational and interpersonal meanings through image, gesture and sound. We do so by viewing action vectors as well as specific manifestations of individual characters. We also draw on the notion of focalisation in relation to interpersonal meaning in our analysis. Developing the work of demand and offered contact from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Painter et al. (2013) expanded this to examine how a character's point of view positions a viewer of an image. An example includes when a character is not making eye-contact when a character's head or eyes are turned to the side. This would mean the character is paying attention elsewhere, not to the viewer. Viewers can also be inscribed as a character in an image which a character's hand and feet are represented at a border's edge to signify the image is being viewed through the eyes of the character or when the back of a character's head and shoulders are represented in an image and the camera is placed over one of the character's shoulders as if the background of the image is being seen from the characters point of

Figure 2. Interpersonal/interactive meaning (Painter et al., 2013, p. 64)



view (Painter et al., 2013). Alongside these observations a character’s gestures can also be analysed, adding to both representational and interpersonal meanings.

How different modes make meaning: Gestural meaning

Communicative meanings through gesture are said to contribute over 80% of meaning (Mehrabian, 2017), yet in the field of semiotics, it receives less attention compared to language and linguistic modes (Barton, 2019). Anstey and Bull (2010) note that gesture is constituted of a number of aspects including articulation, direction, speed and stillness. Facial expressions or corporeal movements are included in gestural meanings and can differ according to context (Barton & Woolley, 2017). Dael, Goudbeek and Scherer (2013) and Dael, Mortiallano and Scherer (2012) for example, showed gesture can represent certain emotions.

Different bodily actions, such as arm movements, can evoke varied emotional arousal, valence and potency (Dael et al., 2013). This work identifies two forms of affect including the main effect (ME) which is the most dominant movement, and the interaction effect (IE) including gestures between two or more objects. These are displayed in Table 1.

When researchers in the field of semiotics identify gestural expression in communicative acts a greater understanding of meaning making is possible (Johnson, 2017; Maiorani, 2016).

Music and sound

Music and sound can be powerful communicative tools for different purposes (Hinton, Nichols, & Chala, 2006). The influence of sound, including music and silence, on meaning, has been explored in a range of literature such as work completed in the disciplines

Table 1. Gesture dynamics with expressed emotion dimensions (adapted from Dael et al., 2013, p. 645)

Expressed emotion dimension	Perceived gestural arm movement	Evidence from Dael et al.’s study
High/low potency/comprehension	Forceful/weak Expansive/contracted	ME, IE × arousal ME, IE × arousal
Positive/negative valence	Fluent/abrupt Higher/lower in space	ME, no IE × arousal No ME, IE × arousal, IE × arousal × potency
High/low arousal	Abundant/few movements Fast/slow	ME ME

of film music and psychomusicology (Ellis & Simons, 2005; Juslin & Sloboda, 2001, 2010; van Leeuwen, 1999). Barton and Unsworth (2014) offered an analytical framework in determining how music soundtracks influence emotion in narratives. The model included

the following musical elements: articulation, dynamics and volume, rhythmic, timbral and tonal features (see Table 2 for more information).

How sound is used in compositions can evoke certain emotional responses from listeners but it is important

Table 2. Aspects in music contributing to meaning

Expressed emotion dimension	Details
Articulation	How sound and what type of sound is produced e.g. attack, staccato (short), tenuto (long) or decreasing in intensity (Shepherd, 2017; Way & McKerrell, 2017)
Dynamics/volume	The volume of sound e.g. loud (forte), soft (piano), decreasing or increasing number of instruments (terraced dynamics)
Rhythmic features and tempo	Influences tempo including repetition and ir/regularity of notes (Vuilleumier, & Trost, 2015). Fast, disjointed producing stress or excitement, high arousal or smooth and slow (low arousal and calmness)
Timbre	The sound colour of instrumentation e.g. piccolo as compared to tuba e.g. metallic, wooden, breathy, shimmery sound qualities (Gundlach, 1935; Rahn, 1998)
Tonal/harmonic features	The relative pitch of sound and intervallic relations between notes e.g. these can be culturally-based such as major tonality indicating happiness or minor (negative valence) in some contexts etc (Barton & Unsworth, 2014).

to note that researchers have highlighted how culture impacts on meaning through sound. For example, in distinct cultural contexts the forms of communication and mode may differ to other contexts which influences the way sound is interpreted (Barton, 2018; Trevarthen & Malloch, 2018; Wilke & Moebus, 2011). For our selected 'text' *Bao*, the composer Toby Chu noted in an online forum that he 'didn't want it to be just traditional Chinese music. It needed to have something modern about it'. He was therefore aware of the need to have some traditional Chinese sounds but also wanted to include more popularised forms of music for a contemporary audience.

Cultural stereotypes of Asian American families and children

Asian Americans have been widely portrayed as the 'model minority' in the studies across the fields of discourse and culture, sociology and psychology (Cheng & Yang, 2000; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). This identity label is used to emphasise this ethnic group's achievements and contribution in the economic sectors. While there is some positivity in depicting Asian Americans as successful role models (Cheng & Yang, 2000), such a stereotypical image could also evoke negative implications such as racial bias or reinforce the peripheral positions of the Chinese

immigrants in Western society (Kawai, 2005; Lee & Joo, 2005).

We analyse how the cultural stereotypes of Asian Americans are represented through their culture specific upbringing in this short film. Model minority is shaped mainly by their 'tiger mums', the stereotypical image of Asian mothers, which was firstly coined by Yale Law School professor Amy Chua in her memoir, presenting successful parenting profiles of her Asian American family (Chua, 2011). These mothers are presented as heavily involved in the child-rearing including being strongly committed to their academic achievement, or to the shaping of the model minorities (Fu & Markus, 2014).

The metaphorical use of 'tiger' highlights the authoritarian and overpowering positions of parents in their families. The reason that Asian mothers are able to be deeply engaged with their children's upbringing is related to the family cohesion and connectedness that featured in Asian collectivistic cultures (Kagitcibasi, 2005). For children in Asian families, filial piety centres their moral values (Yeh, Yi, Tsao, & Wan, 2013). To show respect, behave well and owe obedience to parents and members of older generations is deeply ingrained in Asian family education as well as official discourses in media (Feng, 2016).

However, this practice of strict rules and moral order

would be challenged by the dynamics in immigrant Chinese families (Hou et al., 2019). Asian families, after relocating to America where individualistic culture prevails, would have experienced varying degrees of assimilation into the new environment (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Therefore, younger generations of Asian American families and their parents may have to face contentions due to a different appreciation of their home cultural heritage (Cheah, Leung, & Zhou, 2013). Such cross-cultural immersion may decrease the construction of stereotypical roles as a successful 'model minority' and proud 'tiger mum' (Portier-Le Cocq, 2019). This paper will analyse the use of images, gestures, and sounds in the movie *Bao* and how the cultural stereotypes of an Asian American family, parenting and children upbringing are produced and reproduced from the point of view of the Chinese born Canadian director who herself is of the second generation of an immigrant family.

Background to the narrative of Bao

The short film *Bao* is set in Canada and tells a story of a Chinese couple who parent a steamed dumpling that surprisingly comes to life. Dialogue is absent from the film and visual, gestural and audio modes are utilised. *Bao* has a double meaning in Mandarin, in the first instance it is pronounced as Bǎo (with first intonation) and written as 包 and when used as a stand alone word it means 'steamed dumpling', however when combined in the phrase 包容 it denotes 'tolerance'. In the second instance it can also pronounced as Bǎo (with third intonation) and written as 宝. This character means a precious treasure, or baby. The Chinese translation of the title of the film *Bao* is 包宝宝 (Bǎo Bǎo Bǎo), meaning the steamed dumpling baby. The film contains several activity sequences that depict the developmental stages of a relationship between the Chinese 'tiger' mother and her steamed dumpling baby. Initially, Bao is dependent on his mother to play, eat and bathe. Both Bao and his mother enjoy these moments and are depicted eating sweet bread together. As the narrative unfolds, Bao becomes more independent and wants to play soccer and spend time with his friends. Unexpectedly, Bao arrives home one evening and introduces his mother to his Canadian fiancé before announcing he is moving out of home. Understandably there is a struggle between the grown-up Bao and his mother who still views him as a small dumpling. The film ends with a reconciled relationship between Bao and his mother depicted by the two adult characters eating sweet bread together. Bao's fiancé is welcomed into the family.

This study analysed the entirety of the short film however, for this paper we share three of the scenes.

These scenes were selected from significant stages of the film's narrative for their representation of Asian American cultural stereotypes regarding family, parenting and child rearing. We highlight the representational and interpersonal meaning in the images and how this co-patterns with the character's gestural and music modalities denoted in the film. A discussion of the inter-modal co-patterning of these bundled modalities will be conducted to explicate the Asian American cultural stereotypes depicted in the film.

Research findings

Scene 1

The first scene features a montage showing Bao being raised by his mother. Bao's mother invests her energy into raising him in their family home, by playing, nursing and feeding him after he hurts himself from a fall. She carries him around in a harness when grocery shopping and takes him to a bakery to select a box of sweet bread, which Bao and she enjoy eating together. Bao begins to grow throughout this montage measured by his height on the door frame of the family house.

The sequences that depict the investment of Bao's mother in his rearing suggest the kinds of Asian American cultural stereotypes depicted in the film. The scene can be considered through its character manifestations and appearances. During the montage Bao is often manifested as a complete character in which his head and body is represented, similarly his mother is mostly represented as a complete figure, though at times is manifested as metonymic body parts such as arms, hands and legs. As the montage unfolds and Bao grows from a baby into a child, several attributes are added to his depiction such as a shirt and glasses to represent this change. Bao's mother's investment in rearing him is represented by the unfolding succession of events across images with most camera changes representing a new activity sequence. Furthermore, within these images Bao's mother is represented as the agent directing her actions towards Bao; for example, after running around Bao falls and she picks him up and reshapes his head (1:42-1:49), or when she shares sweet bread with him on a bus home from shopping (2:05). In contrast, Bao uses non-transactional vectors such as when he is running around his mother's feet before falling over (1:39). Also, conversion vectors are used by Bao when selecting the sweet bread, Bao's mother is looking at him and he is pointing to the sweet bread (2:04).

A bonding between these representational and interpersonal resources is created during the montage to demonstrate the investment of Bao's mother in his rearing, as a social feeling is created between Bao and

his mother through the use of medium and eye level camera frames (1:39-1:44). This bonding is further enhanced through the use of observed and unmediated focalisation that invites the audience to look upon the interactions between the caring mother and her son. Bidirectional vectors are utilised between both characters such as when Bao's height is being measured (2:07-2:26) which is coupled with medium frames and frontal camera angles of Bao to create a socially involved connection with him as he grows.

In this introductory sequence a musical motif is introduced to the listener, as seen in Figure 3.

The motif in Figure 3 features traditional Chinese

interpersonal resources utilised in the second montage have been represented in Table 2. Bao's resistance first occurs while he is grocery shopping with his mother and sees children running and kicking a soccer ball. Bao attempts to chase after them. His mother catches Bao and counsels him about running off on her. This is followed by Bao and his mother practising Tai Chi in a park. Bao notices the group of children playing soccer again and runs over to join them. The children kick the ball to Bao, who head butts the ball causing his head to go out of shape. The children kick the ball again to Bao, however his mother slides and kicks the ball away before it reaches Bao. Relieved his mother scoops Bao

Figure 3: The main musical theme in *Bao*



instrumentation scored by composer Toby Chu, that of the erhu and pipa (stringed instruments) and the xiao (bamboo flute). The melody is based on a B flat pentatonic scale. It begins with an interval between the fifth (dominant) and first (tonic) note in the scale and the main theme is played within an octave. This introductory piece accompanies the moving image effectively as the rhythmic features depict movement, that is, someone at work making dumplings. The piece also features the setting of the narrative – a community of Chinese immigrants in Canada – with the camera panning out. Harmonically the instruments are playing in unison (strings and winds playing same theme with some accompanying chords on beats 2 and 4 which moves the action forward) which is typical of traditional folk Chinese music and so the composer knows that about the Chinese culture. The main motif is repeated throughout the scene allowing a sense of contentment. This indicates the safe and secure relationship depicted between the mother and Bao.

Scene 2

The second montage that will be analysed from the film depicts Bao now a primary aged child wanting to play soccer with a group of children the same age. Bao's mother is still heavily invested in his rearing as discussed in scene 1, however this second scene depicts Bao's initial attempts to resist the authoritarian position of his mother. The visual representation and

up as the scene ends.

The character manifestations and appearances through the scene depict all characters complete with their heads and bodies. The appearance of the characters do not change greatly during the scene, initially Bao and his mother are given receded status by being represented in the background of the image while the children kicking the soccer ball are given more prominence in the foregrounded of the image (2:32). Comparable to scene 1 most camera changes represent a new activity sequence in the unfolding of the film. When Bao initially sees the children playing soccer, he reacts through the use of a non-transactional vector representing him staring at the children. This is followed by non-agentive conversions in which Bao follows the children and his mother chases after him. His mother's eyes gaze at Bao and Bao's gaze depicts the conversion. After scooping Bao up, his mother acts as the agent by pointing her figure at Bao to sanction him for running off on her (2:38). During Tai Chi practice when Bao notices and joins the children playing soccer he becomes the agent of the action represented by a unidirectional eye gaze focusing on the goal of the children playing soccer (2:41; 2:46). A bidirectional vector is used between the children and Bao to invite him to play soccer with them. These interactions in which Bao becoming the agent of the action represent Bao's attempts to resist the authority of this mother. However, these attempts at resistance are followed by

Bao's mother becoming the agent of actions represented by a unidirectional vector to kick the soccer ball away from Bao and then a bidirectional vector when she lifts Bao to safety.

These representational depictions are bonded with the frequent use of observed, unmediated focalisation with distant camera frames to create an impersonal connection between Bao, his mother and the audience throughout the scene. When Bao's mother is sanctioning him for running off a middle-distance eye level camera frame is utilised to create a social connection between the viewer and the characters. Bao is depicted with a frontal camera angle creating a feeling of involvement and his mother a side on angle creating a feeling of detachment between the viewer and her (2:38). The image that depicts Bao's mother noticing he has run off to play soccer during Tai Chi practice, captures her eye inviting contact with the viewer to demand their attention (2:48). A middle distance, frontal, eye level camera angle is utilised to represent the urgency and panic she must feel to see Bao nearly hit by a soccer ball. A side-on camera shot implies she is looking in Bao's direction. These interpersonal resources are coupled together and resonate the mother's emotion at seeing her child being potentially in harm's way.

In relation to the music soundtrack, a new bridging theme is introduced when the camera pans to the characters doing Tai Chi in the park. The music includes aspects of the main theme at a slower tempo and softer dynamics. Once back home, the main theme returns played one tone higher in pitch. When the boys run past with the soccer ball and Bao joins them the music becomes faster, still on traditional stringed instruments and in a pentatonic scale but underlying western orchestral stringed instruments playing a driving rhythm:

Figure 4: Driving rhythm played on stringed instruments



When the mother catches Bao, sweeping him up, the orchestral strings play an ascending melody leading to another variation on the main theme (now in a minor key) and changing once again to the original major key when Bao continues to play soccer. The minor key foreshadows the relationship between mother and Bao as starting to experience tension. When the two are back home the music gets softer where mum is cooking (attempting to repair any relationship damage) when Bao walks into the kitchen to get his own food and a

coke from the fridge in defiance – when he looks up at her the tuba plays an ascending semitone in an almost humorous way.

Scene 3

The third montage analysed from the film depicts Bao's family and his Anglo-fiancée surrounding a table folding bao dumplings. Bao is placed in between his fiancée and his mother. Bao's father is seated at the end of the table beside his fiancée watching television. Bao's mother is depicted consoling him as he struggled to fold his dumpling. Bao's fiancée then presents the dumpling she has folded. Bao and his mother are astonished by her perfectly folded bao.

The scene commences with a metonymic depiction of Bao's hands folding a dumpling. The following manifestation of Bao, his mother and fiancée are complete depictions with increased descriptive details representing the characters. Bao's father is depicted with increased attribution displaying a maple leaf on the front of his jumper. The depiction of Bao's family around the table construes a representation of a model Chinese minority family that is akin to a North American family culture. The scene is sequenced through the camera changes that represent the commencement of a new activity sequence. Bao's hands act as vectors to fold his bao. The next camera change utilises unidirectional vectors, one by Bao's mother who is looking at him to console about his folding of the bao, the second by Bao's fiancée concentrating on folding her bao. The final camera change has Bao and his parents all utilising unidirectional vectors focused on his fiancée representing their astonishment.

These representational depictions bond together with interpersonal depictions of the family. When Bao is folding his dumpling observed mediated focalisation is utilised, which inscribe Bao's hands and position the viewer as Bao. The rest of the scene utilises observed unmediated focalisation. This is accompanied by a medium, frontal eye level camera frame which creates an involved social connection between Bao's family and the viewer which resonate to align and acknowledge the similarities between the depicted model minority and that of a Western family.

The music in this scene sees a return to the main theme introduced in Scene 1. The tonality is in a major key indicating a sense of happiness. Both traditional Chinese stringed and wind instruments are used as well as a traditional Western orchestra. Given the composer indicated his choice to make the soundtrack more contemporary it could also mean that the performance of the two cultures side-by-side align with the image/gesture interaction between Bao's parents, himself and

his fiancée. In this scene the main theme has a slight increase in tempo and the pitch is higher than in the original key by two tones. This provides a brighter timbre improving the feeling of *happiness*.

Discussion and conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of image, gesture and sound in the short film *Bao*, shows powerful intermodal relations in demonstrating particular cultural representations and interpersonal meanings that can be explored in classroom contexts. The relationship between the mother and Bao is central to the narrative and in the beginning of the short film this partnership is one of love and care, often shown through the cooking and sharing of food. However, once Bao grows up he is more influenced by outside factors – school friends, popular sporting activities and then an Anglo-fiancée. In order to convey a shift in Bao's and his mother's relationship from one of dependence to independence the creators of the short film use the meaning making tools of image, gesture and music. For students in the classroom an understanding of the choices that film producers, music composers and animators make is necessary in analysing the characters' relationships with each other and therefore understanding how particular social and cultural norms are represented.

It is clear in this short film that Bao's mother aims to raise her child in a stereotypical Chinese minority fashion. This is reflected in a number of features including how Bao wears a nicely buttoned up shirt and tie, symbolising neatness and order as well as having to wear glasses (which often symbolically depict intelligence and characteristics of striving towards academic success) (Scene 1). To ensure the integrity and inclusion of her son within the Chinese minority community Bao is banned from participating in any activities not considered as prestigious in Chinese culture by his overprotective mother, such as soccer. This strict adherence to Chinese values and Chinese culture imposed by the mother leads to rebellion from Bao, in him actively choosing to align with Western culture as shown when choosing Coca Cola, a symbol of Western multi-national consumerism, over his mother's Chinese cooking and when removing his culture-appropriate clothing to change into 'normal' trendy clothing when hanging out with friends who are far removed from his mother's thoughts of model companions (Scene 2). Such a clash of ideologies leads to a breakdown in the relationship between mother and son and is depicted through the increased disengagement of their gazes, together with the increasing pitch in the background music, bringing the story to a climax. The representation of the tensions between the mother and

son showcases how students can verbally articulate or semiotically present the conflicts they encounter. The short film could inform students that verbal and non-verbal languages convey not only information but also emotions. Such a shift in mother and son relationships can be discussed by students in classrooms in relation to whether they have felt like this before with parents/carers and/or how the use of modes contribute to the tension.

In Scene 3 the reparation of the family's relationship and the inclusion of a new family member, Bao's blonde and clearly Anglo-fiancée, come about through the concept of food and food making. The items and movements chosen to be presented in this scene mostly bear a round shape. As a result, another popular Chinese/Asian notion of 'tuán yuán' is invoked. This term can be translated literally as 'forming circles' but semantically it means 'getting together' or 'reunion'. The reunion of Bao's family is depicted through the bond of the representational resources of the traditional Chinese round dining table and the round shape of the food bao, as well as the interpersonal resources of a medium, frontal eye level shot of Bao's family sitting around the table and sharing the time of bringing together the folds of the dumpling bao. Again, students could discuss how their own cultural practices at home might be relaxed in contemporary times so that compromises can be found amongst parents, elders and young people. We argue that the short film may provide examples of demonstrating cultural priorities through different symbols and metaphors.

Further, as a result of the analysis of this short film students can discuss how characters are represented and what types of interactional responses are intended for the film's audience. Discussion about the significant contribution of both food and the traditional music instrumentation throughout the short film can highlight how the film's makers represented 'Asian-ness'. Scenes such as when Bao and his mum eat sweet bread together; when she cooks a huge feast for him, only for him to reject this gesture, and then making dumplings together as a completely new family represent what Stenglin (2009) calls bondicons. Food is used as a kind of social emblem of belonging. So too, is the inclusion of the traditional stringed and wind instruments throughout the music score. Barton and Unsworth (2014) showed how listening audiences have been familiarised by 'acculturated' sounds through films. Examples include Bollywood soundtracks and Asian film scores such as depicted in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* with its exceptional percussive and Chinese orchestral scores (Ming, 2017; Wong, 2019).

We hope that our analysis has provided a quality

example of how teachers can respond to expectations in the Australian Curriculum: English including its aim to ensure that students:

learn to listen to, read, view, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and multimodal texts across a growing range of contexts with accuracy, fluency and purpose. (ACARA, n.d)

This study has shown that engaging deeply and critically with texts such as *Bao* can reveal important cultural and/or social beliefs and stereotypes, often perpetuated by popular culture through widespread media such as Disney films. Students and teachers can draw on these popular texts to determine ‘how visual and multimodal texts allude to or draw on other texts or images to enhance and layer meaning’ (ACELA1548). We have shown throughout this paper that the interrelations between the modes of image, gesture and sound create distinct cultural meanings particularly through the use of traditional activities (e.g. cooking, exercising, parental involvement) as well as introduce tensions between two cultures such as Western and Eastern traditions. Discussions with students on the representation of cultural stereotypes in a range of texts can illuminate the perpetuation of such biases through different media. Diverse students can also share their own experiences with their classmates in relation to how their own cultural backgrounds are largely represented in films, advertisements and/or texts (ACARA, n.d.).

The meaning making resources used in the short film *Bao* are effectively used in contributing to the representation of Asian cultural stereotypes but does so in a way that contemporary audiences can engage with. Our analysis shows that investigating image, gesture and sound in orchestration with each other is important in determining these meanings as only analysing one over others could reduce the impact of the character representations as well as the intended narrative. Implications from this study can be drawn from the analysis and implemented in schools with students undertaking studies in English language, media arts or the arts in general. Using a range of media texts, such as the short film *Bao*, has great potential for students to not only understand the use of different modes in representing meaning but how these can have powerful influences over audiences. Awareness of cultural stereotypes and how these shift in contemporary times can support students in being more inclusive and empathetic towards people who may have different cultural and family experiences to themselves.

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Georgina Barton is a Professor of literacies and pedagogy in the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. She is also Associate Head of School – Research. Georgina has experience as a Program Director for preservice teachers and teaches English and literacy education. Before being an academic, Georgina taught in schools for over 20 years including teaching English in South India with Australian Volunteers International. She has been an acting principal, coordinator of international students, and a lead teacher in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Georgina also has extensive experience in teaching the arts in schools and universities and often utilises the arts to support students' literacy learning outcomes. She has over 120 publications in the areas of the arts and literacy. Her most recent book with Routledge Publishers is *Developing Literacy and the Arts in Schools*.

Nathan Lowien is a Lecturer in English Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of Southern Queensland, Springfield, Queensland. For over 10 years Nathan has been a classroom teacher and literacy educator in schools. His research and publications are in the area of educational semiotics and systemic functional linguistics. Nathan has an interest in multimodality and videogames. His PhD research involves the semiotic representation of values in videogames.

Yijun Hu is a doctoral candidate at Griffith University. Her research area is sociology of education. With research experience in both China and Australia, she has developed a special interest in exploring knowledge dissemination, pedagogical transformation and professional identity construction of Asian academics when traveling between home countries/cultures and the Western ones. Her doctoral research also explores policies that foster transnational research collaboration and internationalisation of higher education.