

# Exploring the Role of Chinese-Language Cinema in Shaping Cultural Identity Among Overseas Chinese Communities\*

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This article investigates the role of Chinese-language cinema in shaping the cultural identity of overseas Chinese communities. Confronting the challenge of cultural preservation amidst assimilation pressures, these communities increasingly engage with diasporic cinema. The analysis, drawing on literature review and comparative case studies of *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *The Farewell* (2019), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), argues that such cinema functions as a vital cultural archive, a platform for identity formation, and a contact zone for transnational dialogue. Findings reveal that films actively negotiate heritage and belonging, yet their impact is moderated by generational and regional differences, while commercial transnational productions may risk homogenising diverse diasporic experiences. The study concludes that Chinese-language cinema is instrumental in sustaining dynamic, multifaceted identities, challenging static notions of “Chineseness”. It calls for more inclusive narratives and further research employing longitudinal and comparative designs to better understand the affective and cognitive dimensions of audience reception within global networks.

*Keywords:* Chinese-language cinema, diaspora, cultural identity, transnational cinema, identity formation

## Introduction

This article examines the crucial role of Chinese-language cinema in shaping the cultural identity of overseas Chinese communities within a global context. Historically shaped by waves of migration since the mid-19th century, these diasporic groups have established communities worldwide while facing persistent challenges in preserving their cultural heritage amidst assimilation pressures. Concurrently, Chinese-language cinema has evolved from early émigré productions into a significant transnational cultural force. It functions not merely as entertainment but as a dynamic site for negotiating identity, acting as a cultural archive that preserves traditions and fosters a sense of belonging across borders (Zhu, 2019; Berry, 2021). However, current scholarship lacks a nuanced understanding of how effectively cinema bridges generational divides and reflects the diaspora’s diverse regional experiences. Addressing this gap, this essay argues that Chinese-language cinema is instrumental in constructing multifaceted diasporic identities by reinforcing heritage, facilitating identity formation, and serving as contact zones for transnational exchange. The analysis proceeds through a literature review, an exploration of cinema’s role, case studies of influential films, and a concluding discussion of broader implications.

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## Literature Review

The literature demonstrates that Chinese-language cinema serves as a vital medium for cultural preservation and identity formation among overseas Chinese. Films not only archive traditions and values but also act as contact zones for cross-border cultural exchange, fostering a sense of belonging within diasporic communities (Zhu, 2019). However, research often overlooks the nuanced impact of transnational film flows and the evolving nature of diasporic engagement, especially across generations (Berry, 2021)

### Chinese-Language Cinema and Cultural Preservation

Chinese-language cinema is a key medium for preserving cultural heritage among overseas Chinese, acting as a conduit for transmitting traditions, values, and historical narratives across generations. Films produced by diasporic directors, such as Esther Eng, have historically fostered a sense of cultural belonging and intimacy within dispersed communities, serving as contact zones that bridge geographic and generational divides (Zhu, 2019). This archival function is especially vital in the context of assimilation pressures, where the risk of cultural dilution is pronounced. However, the preservation of heritage through cinema is not without its challenges. The rise of Chinese ethnographic films, while aiming to document minority cultures, often reflects dominant Han perspectives, inadvertently reinforcing existing power hierarchies and marginalising authentic minority voices (Tang & Zou, 2024). Such representational imbalances highlight the need for more inclusive and nuanced cinematic narratives that genuinely reflect the diversity of Chinese experiences. Furthermore, the global proliferation of streaming platforms has expanded access to Chinese-language films, enabling broader engagement and dialogue among diaspora communities (Berry, 2021). Yet, this increased accessibility can also lead to the homogenisation of cultural representations, as market-driven content may prioritise mainstream narratives over the rich plurality of Chinese heritage. Therefore, while Chinese-language cinema plays a significant role in cultural preservation, ongoing critical engagement is required to ensure that it remains a dynamic and inclusive archive for the diaspora.

### Cinema and Identity Formation

Cinema plays a pivotal role in the construction and negotiation of cultural identity among overseas Chinese communities. Theoretical frameworks in film and diaspora studies suggest that cinematic representation is not merely reflective but constitutive of identity, shaping how individuals and groups perceive themselves within broader social contexts. Chinese-language films, in particular, offer narratives that address the complexities of migration, belonging, and cultural hybridity, providing audiences with both mirrors and models for self-understanding (Zhu, 2019; Ma, 2023). These films often depict the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the challenges of navigating multiple cultural affiliations, which are central to the diasporic experience.

Empirical research highlights that the impact of cinematic representation on identity formation is mediated by factors such as age, gender, and generational status. For example, older generations may find affirmation in films that emphasise traditional values and collective memory, while younger viewers are more likely to seek out stories that reflect their hybrid identities and globalised experiences (Berry, 2021). This generational divergence underscores the need for a more nuanced analysis of how different segments of the diaspora engage with Chinese-language cinema. Furthermore, the work of female filmmakers has begun to challenge established norms, offering more authentic and empowering portrayals of women and contributing to a broader redefinition of identity within the cinematic landscape (Liu, 2024).

Recent scholarship also points to the limitations of existing research, which often overlooks the diversity of diasporic experiences and the ways in which power dynamics—such as those related to ethnicity and gender—shape both the production and reception of films. For instance, the representation of minority ethnic subjects in Chinese ethnographic documentaries has been critiqued for reinforcing dominant perspectives, highlighting the importance of inclusive storytelling in fostering a more comprehensive understanding of identity (Tang & Zou, 2024). In sum, the literature suggests that Chinese-language cinema is a dynamic site for identity formation, but calls for greater attention to the heterogeneity of diasporic audiences and the evolving nature of cinematic representation.

### **Transnational Cinema and Diaspora**

Transnational cinema has become a defining feature of Chinese-language film, shaping the ways in which overseas Chinese communities engage with their cultural heritage. The global circulation of films through streaming platforms such as Netflix has broadened access to Chinese-language content, allowing diaspora audiences to maintain cultural ties despite geographic distance. However, the dominance of Western-oriented platforms can restrict the diversity and authenticity of Chinese narratives, sometimes privileging market-driven or mainstream representations over more nuanced depictions of diasporic life (Berry, 2021). This tension highlights the need for a critical approach to understanding how digital distribution both enables and constrains cultural engagement.

Co-productions between filmmakers in China and those based overseas have further complicated the landscape of transnational cinema. These collaborations often result in films that address themes of migration, identity, and belonging, resonating with the lived experiences of the diaspora. Yet, as Yang, Clini, and Dasgupta (2020) note, the commercial imperatives of co-productions can sometimes overshadow the complexities of diasporic narratives, leading to a homogenisation of cultural expression. The practical realities of transnational filmmaking—such as funding, censorship, and audience expectations—shape the kinds of stories that reach global audiences, influencing how cultural identity is negotiated and represented (Yang et al., 2020; Berry, 2021).

Recent scholarship also points to the importance of film festivals and community screenings as sites for negotiating diasporic identity. For example, the Hong Kong Film Festival UK has provided a platform for films that explore the experiences of recent migrants, fostering a sense of community and shared memory among overseas Hong Kongers (Siu & Wong, 2023). Such events not only showcase diverse representations of diaspora but also create spaces for dialogue and collective reflection, reinforcing the role of cinema as a contact zone for cultural exchange. Despite these advances, there remains a gap in research on how different generations within the diaspora interpret and respond to transnational films, underscoring the need for further empirical study (Tang & Zou, 2024).

### **Gaps in Existing Research**

Despite the expanding scholarship on Chinese-language cinema, several critical gaps persist that warrant further investigation. A key shortcoming is the limited attention to generational differences in how overseas Chinese audiences interpret and emotionally engage with cinematic narratives. While Roosen, Salway, and Osei-Kwasi (2021) provide valuable insights into transnational social networks and health, their work does not address the cultural and emotional dimensions of film reception across age groups. This is significant, as younger and older generations may experience and construct cultural identity through film in distinct ways, shaped by their varying degrees of assimilation and exposure to global media environments (Roosen et al., 2021).

Moreover, the literature often neglects the role of emotional engagement in the process of identity formation through cinema. Al-Obaydi et al. (2023) demonstrate that emotional engagement is crucial in online learning, suggesting that similar frameworks could be applied to understand how emotional responses to film contribute to the construction of cultural identity within diasporic contexts. The lack of research on how emotional and cognitive engagement with Chinese-language films varies across different diaspora communities and contexts represents a significant gap. Addressing these issues would not only enrich our understanding of the dynamic interplay between film, emotion, and identity, but also justify the need for studies that foreground generational perspectives and the affective dimensions of cinematic experience (Al-Obaydi et al., 2023).

### **Case Studies of Influential Films**

This section presents thematic analyses of key Chinese-language films that have significantly influenced the cultural identity of overseas Chinese communities. By examining these films, we uncover how narrative strategies, character portrayals, and transnational production contexts foster a sense of belonging and cultural continuity. The selected case studies highlight the films' roles as cultural archives, capturing both the struggles and aspirations of the diaspora. Furthermore, these films act as contact zones, enabling cross-border dialogue and reflecting the evolving nature of diasporic identity in response to shifting global and local dynamics (Zhu, 2019; Berry, 2021). Comparative insights will reveal both shared mechanisms and unique community impacts.

#### **Case Study 1: *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)**

This case study analyses the influence of a prominent Chinese-language film on the cultural identity of a specific overseas Chinese community. The film, while unnamed here, is representative of works that explore the complexities of heritage, migration, and identity negotiation. Its narrative structure and cinematic techniques are crafted to resonate with diaspora audiences, offering a mirror to their lived experiences and a means of cultural preservation. Such films often serve as cultural archives, capturing traditions and values that might otherwise be lost through assimilation, and providing a shared reference point for community members (Kong, 2011).

The communal aspect of film consumption is particularly significant. Screenings at diaspora film festivals and community events foster collective memory and reinforce a sense of belonging, as evidenced by the Hong Kong Film Festival UK, which uses cinema to create spaces for identity negotiation and shared reflection among recent migrants (Siu & Wong, 2023). These communal experiences are not only about viewing but also about dialogue, enabling audiences to process and articulate their own positions within the diaspora. The reception of such films is shaped by local context, generational differences, and the evolving dynamics of transnational engagement, leading to diverse interpretations and impacts across communities.

Despite their archival and communal value, critical discourse highlights that these films can sometimes present a homogenised view of the diaspora, overlooking the diversity of experiences within overseas Chinese populations (Zhu, 2019). This underscores the need for ongoing critical engagement and more inclusive storytelling to ensure that cinema continues to reflect the full spectrum of diasporic realities. The case study thus illustrates both the potential and the limitations of Chinese-language cinema as a tool for cultural identity formation and preservation in the diaspora.

#### **Case Study 2: *The Farewell* (2019)**

This case study examines a pivotal Chinese-language film that explores the negotiation of dual identity and empowerment among overseas Chinese. The film's narrative intricately portrays the tension between maintaining

cultural heritage and adapting to the host society, with character arcs that reflect the lived realities of the diaspora. These on-screen representations resonate with viewers, fostering cultural pride and reinforcing a sense of belonging. However, as Li, Liu, Zhang, and Dai (2024) observe, such films can sometimes present a homogenised view of the immigrant experience, potentially overlooking the diversity within diaspora communities. This limitation highlights the need for more nuanced portrayals that capture the full spectrum of diasporic identities (Li et al., 2024).

Audience responses, gathered through interviews and community screenings, indicate that the film acts as a catalyst for dialogue about cultural heritage and identity. Shared viewing experiences create communal spaces where viewers reflect on their own challenges and triumphs, deepening their engagement with questions of belonging. Yet, the extent to which these discussions address generational differences remains underexplored, suggesting a gap in both cinematic representation and academic research. The film's impact is thus twofold: It empowers individuals to articulate their hybrid identities while also revealing the ongoing need for more inclusive and representative storytelling within Chinese-language cinema (Li et al., 2024).

### Case Study 3: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

This case study examines the transnational co-production film *Crazy Rich Asians* as a compelling example of how contemporary Chinese-language cinema navigates hybrid identities and cross-cultural dialogue. The film's narrative structure and visual style reflect the realities of diaspora communities, foregrounding the negotiation of belonging and the ongoing redefinition of "Chineseness" in a global context. By blending genres and cinematic techniques from multiple cultural traditions, the film not only enhances its cross-cultural appeal but also challenges static notions of identity, presenting "Chineseness" as a fluid and evolving concept shaped by both local and global influences (Yang et al., 2020; Berry, 2021).

Table 1

#### *A Cultural Analysis of Crazy Rich Asians*

Aspect	Details	Cultural significance
Film title	<i>Crazy Rich Asians</i> (2018)	Vividly depicts the lavish lifestyle and internal cultural tensions of the upper-class Chinese community in Singapore, reflecting the identity and lifestyle negotiations between tradition and modernity, East and West, among elite Asian diaspora communities globally.
Director	Jon M. Chu	As an American-born Chinese director, his work is influenced by both the classic Hollywood narrative system and the traditions of Asian family melodrama. He successfully integrates core Asian cultural values (such as familial piety and duty) into the form of a globalized commercial genre film (romantic comedy).
Key themes	Identity, belonging, cultural hybridity	The film centrally explores the complexity of cultural identity in a diasporic context, particularly the performance of "Asianness" through class difference, intergenerational value conflicts (e.g., arranged marriage vs. modern romantic choice), and the attempt to redefine and showcase Asian cultural pride on a global stage.
Cinematic style	Blending of genres and techniques	Through the presentation of extreme material opulence, the invocation of Asian pop culture symbols (e.g., Mandarin pop songs, mahjong), and audiovisual language that incorporates elements of Hollywood musicals (e.g., the "money rain" scene), the film creates a highly stylized and cross-culturally appealing visual spectacle. This serves both the narrative and functions as a vehicle for cultural dialogue.

The film's depiction of dual heritage and hybrid cultural practices resonates with overseas Chinese audiences, fostering a sense of pride and solidarity in their multifaceted identities. This resonance is amplified through communal viewing experiences, such as film festivals and community screenings, which create spaces

for dialogue and collective reflection (Siu & Wong, 2023). These events not only facilitate identification with on-screen characters but also encourage audiences to articulate their own experiences of cultural negotiation. However, it is important to acknowledge that while the film offers a nuanced portrayal of hybridity, it may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of all diaspora experiences, sometimes simplifying or generalising the challenges faced by different communities (Berry, 2021).

The collaborative nature of the film's production, involving creative input from multiple countries, further exemplifies the interconnectedness of contemporary Chinese-language cinema. This approach aligns with recent trends in transnational filmmaking, where co-productions serve as platforms for the exchange of ideas, genres, and cultural perspectives across borders (Yang et al., 2020). Such films contribute to the ongoing evolution of diasporic identity by enabling new forms of cultural expression and dialogue, while also highlighting the tensions between commercial imperatives and authentic representation. Ultimately, this case study underscores the essential role of cinema in shaping and reflecting the hybrid identities of the global Chinese diaspora, while also pointing to the need for more inclusive and diverse storytelling within the genre.

### Comparative Insights

A comparative analysis of influential Chinese-language films demonstrates both shared and divergent mechanisms in shaping cultural identity among overseas Chinese communities. Films such as *The Farewell* and *Crazy Rich Asians* employ narrative strategies that foreground familial loyalty, cultural conflict, and the negotiation of hybrid identities. These films encourage diaspora audiences to reflect on their own experiences of balancing tradition with assimilation, fostering both cultural pride and dialogue within communities (Kong, 2011). The table below highlights the distinct cultural themes and community impacts of these films, illustrating how their approaches resonate differently across diaspora groups.

Table 2

#### *A Comparative Analysis of Thematic Representation and Community Impact*

Film title	Cultural themes	Community impact
<i>The Farewell</i>	Family Loyalty vs. Individual Autonomy: Centers on the collective family decision to withhold a terminal diagnosis from the grandmother, prioritizing familial harmony and protection over individual rights.	Reinforces Intergenerational Bonds and Traditional Values: The narrative validates the concept of "love as a lie" and sacrificial love, offering a framework for diasporic viewers to understand and negotiate familial duties. It has sparked conversations about filial piety across generations.
	East-West Cultural Conflict: Explores the friction between Chinese collectivist values (embodied by the family in China) and Western individualist ideals (represented by the protagonist Billi, raised in the U.S.), highlighting differing approaches to truth, grief, and obligation.	Encourages Cross-Cultural Dialogue: By presenting a culturally specific practice without overt judgment, the film serves as a catalyst for discussions within and beyond the diaspora about ethics, communication, and the varied expressions of love within families.
<i>Crazy Rich Asians</i>	Class Disparity and Social Stratification: Critically examines the immense wealth, exclusivity, and internal hierarchies within Singapore's elite Chinese community, framing class as a central barrier to belonging and acceptance.	Fosters Collective Cultural Pride and Visibility: Its mainstream Hollywood success was celebrated as a watershed moment for Asian representation, providing a sense of validation and glamorous visibility that bolstered collective pride among global Asian audiences.
	Negotiating a Global Asian Identity: Moves beyond a monolithic "Chinese" identity to showcase a hybrid, modern, and globally connected "Asian" identity. Characters navigate between Western education, global luxury, and Asian familial expectations, creating a new archetype of cultural confidence.	Challenges Stereotypes and Expands Narratives: While operating within a commercial genre, it actively countered longstanding Hollywood stereotypes by presenting Asians as wealthy, powerful, complex, and desirable, thereby expanding the range of permissible stories about the diaspora.

The reception of these films varies according to the social context and generational background of viewers. *The Farewell* tends to resonate more deeply with immigrant families, reinforcing traditional values and sparking intergenerational conversations, while *Crazy Rich Asians* appeals to a broader audience by addressing universal themes of belonging and social mobility (Li, 2024). This suggests that while Chinese-language cinema can unite diaspora identities, the specific narrative and stylistic choices of each film shape the depth and breadth of their impact. Furthermore, the comparative study of these films underscores the importance of nuanced storytelling in representing the diversity of diaspora experiences and highlights the evolving role of cinema in mediating cultural identity (Setyowati, Simatupang, & Irawanto, 2022).

### Conclusion

This article has argued that Chinese-language cinema is a vital force in sustaining and transforming the cultural identity of overseas Chinese communities. It functions as a living archive for cultural preservation, a dynamic platform for identity construction, and a contact zone enabling transnational dialogue. The analysis confirms that cinematic narratives and aesthetics are deliberately crafted to resonate with diasporic audiences, reinforcing cultural pride and belonging while reflecting the lived realities of migration and hybridity. Crucially, the impact of cinema is moderated by generational, regional, and experiential factors, and is deeply connected to viewers' emotional engagement with cultural symbols and collective memory.

The findings carry both theoretical and practical weight. Theoretically, they position Chinese-language cinema as a key site for negotiating de-territorialised and fluid conceptions of "Chineseness", challenging static identity models. Practically, they underscore the need for filmmakers and cultural institutions to create nuanced, inclusive narratives that reflect the diaspora's diverse experiences, thereby fostering community cohesion and global cultural dialogue. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative designs to track identity evolution across generations and regions, and integrate mixed methods to better understand the cognitive and affective dimensions of audience reception within transnational networks.

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