

การปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมและการสร้างตัวตน ในภาพยนตร์หลานม่า

Acculturation Strategies and Identity Formation in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้วิเคราะห์กลยุทธ์การปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมและอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีนรุ่นที่สอง สาม และสี่ ผ่านทฤษฎีการปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมของ (acculturation theory) ของจอห์น แบร์รี (John W. Berry) และแนวคิดพื้นที่ที่สาม (third space) ของโฮมี บาบา (Homi Bhabha) โดยใช้ภาพยนตร์ *หลานม่า* (2567) เป็นกรณีศึกษา การศึกษานี้ใช้การวิเคราะห์ข้อความจากบทสนทนาและฉากต่างๆ เพื่อสำรวจแนวทางการปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมและพื้นที่ที่สามในแง่ของการใช้ภาษาและการปฏิบัติตามขนบธรรมเนียม ผลการศึกษาพบว่าตัวละครชาวไทยเชื้อสายจีนใช้กลยุทธ์การปรับตัวที่แตกต่างกัน รุ่นที่สองใช้วิธีการผสมผสานวัฒนธรรมจีนเข้ากับวัฒนธรรมไทย (integration) รุ่นที่สามมักใช้กลยุทธ์การผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมในบริบทครอบครัว แต่มีแนวโน้มที่จะใช้กลยุทธ์การกลมกลืน (assimilation) ในบริบทที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการทำงาน

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หรือที่เป็นทางการ ส่วนรุ่นที่สี่มุ่งเน้นการกลมกลืนเข้ากับสังคมไทย โดยเห็นได้จากความสามารถทางภาษาจีนที่ลดลงและมีการปฏิบัติตามขนบธรรมเนียมจีนลดน้อยลง อย่างไรก็ตาม ภาพยนตร์เรื่องนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าคนรุ่นที่สี่ยังคงสามารถรักษาความเชื่อมโยงกับบรรพบุรุษได้หากพวกเขาเลือกที่จะทำ ซึ่งสะท้อนให้เห็นว่ามรดกทางวัฒนธรรมไม่สามารถสูญหายไปโดยสิ้นเชิง นอกจากนี้ การศึกษานี้ยังพบว่าตัวละครไทยเชื้อสายจีนสร้างอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ของตนเองในพื้นที่ที่สามซึ่งเชื่อมต่อระหว่างวัฒนธรรมจีนและไทย โดยอัตลักษณ์ที่ถูกสร้างใหม่ในพื้นที่ที่สามนี้ไม่ได้เป็นจีนหรือไทยโดยสมบูรณ์

คำสำคัญ: การปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรม พื้นที่ที่สาม คนไทยเชื้อสายจีน หลานม่า

Abstract

This study examines the acculturation strategies and cultural identities of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Sino-Thais by employing Berry's acculturation theory and Bhabha's concept of the third space. This paper analyzes the portrayals of Sino-Thais in the film *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* (2024). Using textual analysis of dialogues and scenes, we explore acculturation and third space in language use and cultural practices. Findings indicate varying acculturation strategies among Sino-Thai characters. The second generation integrates Chinese culture into Thai culture, while the third generation primarily employs an integration strategy in familial contexts and an assimilation strategy in professional or formal settings. The fourth generation adopts an assimilation strategy, resulting in a decline in Chinese language proficiency and reduced engagement with Chinese traditions. However, the film demonstrates that the fourth generation can maintain a connection with their ancestors if they choose to, highlighting the enduring nature of Chinese heritage. This suggests that cultural heritage cannot be entirely lost. Furthermore, this study reveals that Sino-Thai

characters construct unique cultural identities in a liminal space, which is neither entirely Chinese nor Thai.

Keywords: Acculturation, Third Space, Sino-Thais, How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies

Introduction

Chinese Immigrants in Thailand

The Chinese have long been a significant cultural group in Thailand. The Chinese immigrants have not only brought their culture and customs to the Thai community but also contributed to creating multiculturalism in the host community. Chinese people have lived among the Thais since the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767). During the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, the Chinese population in Siam increased due to the impact of the Opium War (1839-1842). Bangkok, the capital of Siam, became a major destination for Chinese immigrants, with most residing in Bangkok and its surrounding areas. It is well-known that overseas Chinese primarily settled in river-adjacent cities like Bangkok, Nakhon Sawan, and Ubon Ratchathani, working as traders and entrepreneurs. From 1868-1945, these Chinese diasporas, such as those living in Ubon Ratchathani, locally functioned as key economic actors, supported by the Siamese Government (Tonlerd et al., 2016, pp. 187) In the mid-twentieth century, to govern the Thai-Chinese, the Thai government under Plaek Phibunsongkhram implemented assimilation policies, including restrictions on Chinese language education, mass media, and associations. These measures led most of the Thai Chinese population to convert and become Thai citizens. This led to a dual identity, where Thai Chinese individuals retained their ethnic Chinese cultural identity while also holding Thai nationality (Jiang, 2022, pp. 11-14). Skinner (1957) even goes so far as to assert that the Sino-Thai population would be fully assimilated into

Thai culture by the fourth generation. As he puts it, “the-fourth generation Chinese were unheard of, not because Chinese had not been settled and rearing families for at least four generations, but because all great-grandchildren of Chinese immigrants had merged with Thai society” (p. 237). For Skinner, the key indicators of successful assimilation among the descendants of Chinese immigrants include their identification as Thai in most social contexts, their strong command of the Thai language, and their tendency to interact more with Thais than with Chinese.

Thai and Chinese Cultures

Thai and Chinese cultures exhibit distinct characteristics, particularly in language use and cultural beliefs. Thai people predominantly use the Thai language to express their cultural identity, while individuals in mainland China communicate in Mandarin and various regional dialects. For the Sino-Thai population, the Thai language serves as their native language, complemented by their proficiency in Mandarin and dialects such as Teochew and Hakka (Prattanasanti, 2019, pp. 6, 20-21).

The cultural beliefs of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand significantly differ from those of Chinese people in mainland China, other Chinese diasporas, and the Thai population itself (Prattanasanti, 2019, pp. 18-19). For example, Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes the concept of filial piety. This principle encourages individuals to respect their ancestors through specific burial and mourning rituals (Lim, 2023, p. 63). One such practice is Qingming, observed annually, during which descendants gather to clean the burial site and prepare food to honor their ancestors (Huang & Suk-erb, 2019, pp. 17-18). In contrast, Thai funeral customs differ notably, as they predominantly practice cremation (Athakit & Punyaporn, 2017, pp. 71-72).

However, despite the differences between Thai and Chinese cultural practices, both cultures share some similarities. For instance, Chinese families

place a strong emphasis on filial piety, with children expected to be obedient to their parents. Similarly, Thai families also expect children to fulfill obligations to their parents by taking care of them (Morita, 2005, pp. 119-120). Cultural similarities also facilitate the assimilation of Chinese immigrants into Thailand. These include preferences for staple foods such as rice, fish, and pork, comparable religious principles between Theravada Buddhism and other Chinese forms of Buddhism, and acceptance of religious diversity and drawing its religious worldview from multiple sources, and slight differences in physical appearances (Skinner, 1957, p. 238).

In brief, while Thai and Chinese cultures differ in language, beliefs, and customs, they share a common respect for elders and a strong emphasis on children being grateful to their parents.

Acculturation Strategies and Identity Formation in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*

How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies, one of the most successful Thai films of 2024, portrays the lives of different generations of Sino-Thais. Directed by Pat Boonnitipat and cowritten by Thodsapon Thiptinnakorn, the film has now been released in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and China. Following theatrical runs in the U.S. and China in 2024, the Bangkok-based studio GDH revealed that as of September 8, 2024, the film had reached the \$50 million mark at the worldwide box office (Brzeski, 2024). In October, it was revealed that *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* would represent Thailand's entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 97th Academy Awards (Surbano, 2024). With this nomination, the film made history as the first Thai movie to enter the shortlist of 15 films selected from 85 international entries, even though it ultimately did not make it to the final five (Nation, 2025).

How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies is narrated by M, a game streamer, and his grandmother, Mengju, who has made a living selling congee.

Diagnosed with stomach cancer, she wishes to be buried in a single burial plot. M volunteers to be her carer, hoping to make millions in the process. During this time, Mengju discovers that Soei, her youngest son, has stolen her money to pay off his debt. Despite the betrayal, Mengju decides to help him by giving him her house. Disappointed by his grandmother's decision, M leaves but understands her choice. Mengju later moves into a nursing home, but M brings her to live with him. She dies peacefully, and M learns she had been saving money for him since his childhood. He uses it to fulfill her final wish of being buried in a single burial plot. The movie critically sheds light on intercultural and intergenerational tensions within the Thai-Chinese family.

The purpose of the study is to examine how Sino-Thai characters from the second to the fourth generation in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* adopt acculturation strategies while living in Thailand as the host culture. It also explores how they negotiate and construct their identities, particularly through language and cultural practices. This paper argues that each generation adopts different strategies, applying them in distinct spheres. While the second generation seeks to integrate into Thai culture while maintaining their heritage culture, the third generation primarily adopts an integration strategy within the family domain and an assimilation one in professional environments. As for the fourth-generation characters, in their efforts to fit into Thai culture, they use less Chinese and engage less with Chinese traditions. However, this does not support Skinner's (1957) claim that Sino-Thais will be fully assimilated into Thai culture, as the fourth-generation characters demonstrate that they can reestablish connections with their heritage culture if they choose so. This suggests that heritage culture is not entirely lost but undergoes transformation; across generations, Sino-Thais are constantly engaged in creating a cultural third space, where they negotiate and construct their identities, navigating a space between Thai and Chinese heritages.

Literature Review

Sino-Thais on Screen

The portrayal of Chinese immigrants in contemporary screen media and literature in Thailand has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Many studies on the representation of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand emphasize how Chinese cultural values and identities are preserved, transformed, or challenged. For instance, Vongpattaranon (2021) examines Sino-Thai cultural identities within Thai societies. The study delineates the key characteristics of the Sino-Thai cultural identities, including the prevalence of multigenerational household structures, a cultural preference for sons over daughters, the management of family-owned businesses, and honoring Thailand as a benefactor. Similarly, Krongbhumin (2022) critically examines four soap operas—*Dai Daeng* (2019), *Repercussion* (2019), *Sanae Nang Ngiew* (2018), and *In Family We Trust* (2018). The study reveals the way these dramas construct representations of Thai-Chinese family life compared to perceived social reality and prevailing societal norms, demonstrating that cultural values and identities of the Sino-Thai presented in these dramas may vary due to individuals' experiences. The study suggests cultural identities as shaped by cultural heritage and current social values.

Phumithammarat and Hutinta (2023) engage in a critical examination of Sino-Thai identities, specifically through the lens of Thai romance novels by V. Vinichayakul published between 1977 and 2016. The work argues that these literary works reveal that traditional Chinese values are contested and ultimately give rise to distinct Sino-Thai identities. Furthermore, the study critiques the prevailing “rags-to-riches” narrative that has historically characterized the Chinese diaspora in Thailand, as these novels present diverse experiences of the Sino-Thai.

In a similar vein, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* explores themes central to earlier studies, such as intercultural tensions,

intergenerational conflicts, and cultural identity formation within Thai-Chinese families. Due to the film's recent release in 2024, there have been only a few scholarly works published on it to date. For instance, Chin and Liu (2025) examine how the film influences travel behavior and contributes to boosting local Thai tourism in the post-COVID-19 era. Additionally, in his cultural commentary on the film, Chan (2024) argues that the film critiques Chinese patriarchal values and reflects the impact of capitalism on familial relationships. While this paper agrees with Chan's point regarding gender inequalities in Thai-Chinese families, it takes a different approach by focusing specifically on the acculturation strategies adopted by Thai-Chinese characters across generations and the negotiation processes surrounding language use and cultural practices. This constitutes our contribution to the existing scholarship on the film and broader cultural studies of Sino-Thai experiences.

Theoretical Frameworks

The researchers apply Berry's acculturation theory and Bhabha's third space theory to analyze *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*. These theories are chosen as analytical frameworks for the film because they examine how individuals deal with living with others in multicultural societies. While Berry provides insights into the broad stages of adjustment and the acculturation strategies used by newcomers, Bhabha offers an understanding of the specific cultural practices or identities that emerge when newcomers navigate life in a new multicultural environment. Berry (2005) defines acculturation as "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p. 698). This process does not happen overnight; it can take years, generations, or even centuries. Acculturation can be driven by various factors such as colonization, war, or migration. These changes may include, among many things, mastering the host language, altering food and

dress preferences, and learning social interactions. Berry (2005) stresses the fact that “[o]ne key feature of all acculturation phenomena is the variability with which they take place” (p. 700). Individuals go through acculturation process at different rates and with different goals. Even within one single family, there can be variations that may lead to conflicts among family members.

Berry proposes a model of acculturation strategies that individuals may adopt when living in a host culture. It consists of four strategies, each with the following characteristics:

- Assimilation: Individuals do not retain their original cultural identity but fully adopt the cultural identity of the host community. They express their desire to fit in by speaking the host language. If they have a family, they may use the host language at home, meaning that their children know little about their heritage language.
- Integration: Individuals preserve their cultural heritage and original cultural identity while establishing relationships with other cultures. Unlike those who adopt the assimilation strategy, they seek to master the host language while continuing to speak their heritage language at home and maintaining certain elements of their cultural practices and behaviors.
- Separation: Individuals avoid adopting the host country’s culture while continuing to embrace their heritage culture. By limiting contact with the host community, they primarily speak their first language with members of their cultural group and may reject dominant values of the host culture.
- Marginalization: Individuals reject both their heritage culture and the host culture. They are not interested in maintaining their original cultural identity and speaking their first language, nor do they seek to develop a new identity aligned with the dominant values of the

host culture. Those who adopt this acculturation strategy often experience isolation and confusion (Jackson, 2024, p. 194).

While Berry's theory of acculturation broadly addresses the stage at which individuals adapt to a new culture, Bhabha's concept of the third space sheds light on how they construct unique identities in their new land by drawing upon various cultural elements. In his examination of colonial power relations, Bhabha challenges the binary view of culture as divided between the colonizer and the colonized and rejects the notion of cultural purity. He emphasizes that when cultures come into contact, a "third space" emerges, one in which new forms of cultural identities are produced. As Bhabha (1991) puts it, "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives" (p. 211).

In other words, the third space is defined as a site of tension and transformation between different cultural discourses and is rooted in hybridity—the fusion of cultures by individuals or groups, resulting in hybrid cultural identities. These hybrid identities reflect the dynamic nature of culture, continuously evolving and shared through interactions among individuals and groups in various cultural contexts (Sterrett, 2015, pp. 654-655). For Bhabha, the third space is an adaptive potential where individuals are not confined to adopting a single dominant culture. Instead, this space allows them to identify, interpret, and shape their cultural identities beyond the rigid constraints of cultural heritage. This space becomes a transformative arena where people can creatively construct identities by appropriating and reinterpreting elements from various cultural frameworks (Tatham, 2023). As Bhabha (1994) puts it, "these 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for

elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (p. 1). The third space—also referred to as in-between space or liminal space—becomes a new site where cultural meanings are contested and negotiated.

Both Berry’s theory of acculturation and Bhabha’s concept of the third space have been influential in film studies and have been widely applied in analyses of films set in diverse cultural contexts. For example, Afriyanto and Widyahening (2023) focus on the interaction between Middle Eastern and Western cultures, examining various aspects such as fashion, women’s emancipation, and tradition in Guy Ritchie’s *Aladdin* (2019). In addition, Yu-qi (2024) reflects the cultural acculturation strategies adopted by Chinese Americans in *The Farewell* (2019), revealing that Chinese-Americans cannot fully adhere to either Chinese or American culture. Employing Bhabha’s concept of the third space, Alkin (2017) explores how a Turkish migrant family in *Vatanyolu* (1987) on a journey from Germany to their home country not only construct their new identities but also create physical spaces that liberate them from social restrictions. Similarly, Bayramian (2019) analyzes Armenian diasporic films including *Calendar* (1993), *Ararat* (2003), *Apricot Groves* (2016), and *The Journey* (2002), demonstrating how the third space serves as a reconciling site for the Armenian characters to blend old and new experiences before and after their migration.

Building on these studies, the present analysis applies both Berry’s theory of acculturation and Bhabha’s concept of the third space to the Thai film *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*. In doing so, the researchers aim to explore how different generations of Sino-Thais employ various acculturation strategies to integrate into Thai society and construct their hybrid identities. This analysis reflects varying degrees of acceptance of the

host culture and highlights the complexities of hybrid identities that cannot be simply categorized as either Chinese or Thai.

Outcomes and Discussion

This part presents an analysis of the acculturation process and the third spaces of the Sino-Thai characters across three generations as depicted in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*. According to Berry (2005), the process of acculturation encompasses several aspects, with language and cultural practices being particularly prominent in the film. Selected scenes and dialogues used for analysis are categorized into these two themes. Most of the English dialogues were taken from the subtitles translated by Netflix. Only a few sentences were translated by the researchers using a literal translation approach to maintain the original's core meaning. All Thai and Chinese words from the selected dialogues were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to accurately represent the correct tones of each word. Moreover, the analysis is organized by generation: the second, third, and fourth. Mengju, the oldest character in the film, represents the second generation of Sino-Thais. She was born in Thailand to Chinese parents who migrated to Thailand and died in Thailand. The third generation is represented by Mengju's children, who were also born in Thailand and hold Thai nationality. The fourth generation is represented by the youngest Sino-Thai characters, M and Rainbow, who are Mengju's grandchildren. The first generation is not analyzed as their roles are not depicted in the film.

Second Generation

Mengju, the character representing the second generation of the Sino-Thai, is portrayed as a person who adopts an integration strategy of acculturation. This reflects a strong preservation of Chinese culture within the Sino-Thai community while blending elements of Thai culture, such as language and cultural practice.

Language. The integration of Chinese and Thai languages is illustrated through Mengju's ability to speak both fluently. She switches between Thai and Chinese to communicate with her family members, often using code-mixing to express her feelings. This is evident in a dialogue where Mengju complains to her grandson, M, about his sloppy behavior:

Mengju: มึงนี่มัน 𠂇 𠂇จริงๆ

/mʊŋ ní mán tɕʰí tɕʰàʔ tɕʰeŋ tɕʰwʔ/

(Can you not be such a qi-chou for once?)

In this scene, after Mengju tells M to stay focused and throw the flower on the top of the burial plot, she notices that M is not paying attention. Mengju reprimands him for being careless. She shifts from the Thai phrase “มึงนี่มัน (mʊŋ ní mán)” to the Chinese word “𠂇 𠂇 (tɕʰí tɕʰàʔ),” which means “sloppy.” Mengju uses this code-mixing because the Chinese word “𠂇 𠂇 (tɕʰí tɕʰàʔ)” can express her feelings better than any Thai words. This sentence demonstrates that Mengju is a character who seamlessly mixes the host country language, Thai, with her original Chinese language.

Another evidence is when Mengju uses a Chinese idiom to teach M and Sew, her daughter:

Mengju: 生米煮成熟饭

/ʃəŋ1 mi1 tɕʰu1 tɕʰəŋ1 sɕ1 fæŋ1/

(No translation)

M: ม่าว่าไรอะ แปลว่าไรอะม้า

/máː wáː rái ʔàː bplɛː wáː rái ʔàː mɔː/

(Ma, what did she say? What did she tell you, Ma?)

Sew: ข้าวสารกลายเป็นข้าวสุกละ สิ่งที่เกิดขึ้นมันก็ย้อนกลับไปไม่ได้ละ

/kʰáːw sǎːn klāːj bpen kʰáːw sùk lɔ sǎŋ tʰiː kɕːt kʰwɛn mán kɔ

jɕːn klàp bpai mâi dáː lɔ/

(The rice grains have become cooked rice. It's a saying that means accept what can't be changed)

The fact that Mengju still speaks Chinese to her Sino-Thai grandchild emphasizes the integration of her cultural identity. This reflects that Mengju still preserves her Chinese cultural heritage and identity.

Another example of the integration strategy used by Mengju is the scene where she thanks M:

Mengju: 谢谢 明仔

/ku: zoi siə mɯŋ nə /

(No translation)

M: หลอกดำไรเอ็มปะนิ

/ʌʊ:k dà: rái ɛ̃:m pà nì/

(Are you insulting me again?)

Mengju: ขอบใจ 明明是讲人话 听不懂出个词

/khɔ̃:p tɕai mɯŋ bpen khon tɕi:n phā:sǎ: rái fāŋ mǎi ʌʊ:k sák kham/

(That means I thank you. Are you sure you're Chinese? You can't understand a single word.)

When Mengju says “thank you” in Teochew, M replies that he does not understand what Mengju says. As a result, she has to translate her words into Thai. Mengju's bilingual exchanges, through code-mixing, idiomatic expressions, and translation, demonstrate that she not only maintains Chinese as part of her Sino-Thai heritage and identity but also incorporates Thai into her communication. While this scene hints at M's abandonment of his Chinese heritage, which will be further discussed below, Mengju's use of both languages bridges linguistic boundaries and facilitates communication across generations. In this instance, Mengju serves as M's translator. Her ability to move fluently between Thai and Chinese aligns with the study of Wu and

Techasan (2016), which examines how the dual presence of Thai and Chinese (primarily Teochew) in shop signs shapes the multilingual landscape of Yaowarat, one of Bangkok's Chinatowns. That the film's setting in Talat Phlu, another major Chinatown in Bangkok, is similarly peppered with multiple languages, testifying to the fact that, contrary to Skinner's (1957) claims, descendents of Chinese immigrants, though fully naturalized as Thai citizens and fluent in Thai, still retain their inherited Chinese language. Mengju's jibe at her grandson, "What kind of Chinese are you?" serves as a reminder not only of her heritage but also his.

In light of Bhabha's theory of the third space, the different linguistic strategies employed by Mengju serve as a testament to the hybrid identities she constructs by incorporating elements from both Thai and Chinese languages. As language is a significant marker of one's identity, when Mengju mixes Thai and Chinese words in a sentence, she essentially reconstructs her hybrid identity by blending aspects of both languages. For instance, she adapts Chinese pronunciation of the pronouns like "you" and "I," adjusting them to reflect the tonal semantics of the Thai language. This linguistic transformation is evident in the scene where Mengju talks to her friend about cancer:

Mengju: เป็นไง เขาปล่อยตัว *仔* กลับมาแล้วหรอ

/bɛn nà **I** kʰǎo plɔj tʰuǎ **weɪ**: klàp mǎ **ɛw** hǎʔ/

(How are you? Did they let you come back already?)

Mengju's friend: เมื่อวานนี้เอง หมอบอกว่าอยู่ไปก็เปลืองเตียง

/m^uǎ wānnī: eŋ mɔ: bɔk wǎ: jù: pai kɔ: pl^uang ti^ɛŋ/

(I got back yesterday. They made me leave to give the bed to someone worse off.)

Mengju: *我*โดนแล้วนะ

/ʔúa duǎn **ɛo** nà/

(I've been hit as well.)

Mengju's use of 你 (lǐ) and 我 (wǎ), meaning “you” and “I,” with the modified pronunciation ลื้อ (lǐ) and อื้อ (wǎ), respectively, demonstrate a shift influenced by the phonetic differences between Thai and Chinese. Instead of using the original Teochew Chinese pronunciation, Mengju frequently uses these modified pronouns when communicating with other Sino-Thai individuals. This change suggests that the second generation actively negotiates between their Thai and Chinese identities by adapting the language to fit the cultural and phonetic context of their environment. These modifications in pronunciation highlight the unique identity of the second generation, which is neither entirely Thai nor Chinese but rather a hybrid Sino-Thai identity.

Cultural practice. The second generation also demonstrates the integration strategy through their cultural practice. The film often portrays Mengju's spiritual refuge as a combination of Thai and Chinese traditions. This is evident in the scene where Mengju chants a Pali phrase, “Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsaṃbuddhassa,” a Buddhist expression showing deep respect and devotion to the Lord Buddha, in front of an unknown grave. When Sew, her daughter, asks if she knows who is buried there, Mengju replies that she is praying to the sacred, hoping to have a private burial plot like the one in front of her. This scene highlights how Mengju's strong desire—rooted in the Chinese belief about the location of a burial ground—is fused with her spiritual refuge in Theravada Buddhism, Thailand's dominant religion. In a way, Mengju's Buddhist chant in front of the burial plot, a symbol of her Chinese roots and spiritual tradition, reflects the hybrid identity of the second generation—the third-space identity that is not exclusively Thai or Chinese, but rather a fusion of both.

In addition, while the film portrays Mengju as deeply devoted to Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy in Chinese mythology, it also depicts her engaging in Thai religious practices. For example, she donates to a Thai coffin

charity and keeps a Buddha image and figure on the headboard storage in her bedroom. Many Thais believe that the Buddha images and figures will protect individuals from misfortunes and bring good luck. The fact that Mengju devoutly worships the Chinese goddess and simultaneously adopts Thai Buddhist rituals demonstrates that the second generation does not strictly adhere to one dominant cultural practice but is open to other cultural practices. This hybrid religious practice, as Skinner (1957, p. 238) observes, might stem from the general traits of Chinese people—like their Thai counterpart—who exhibit a high degree of religious tolerance and eclecticism.

This openness to a new way of life allows the second generation to create a third space where they reconstruct their Chinese roots within a Thai cultural context. An example of this adaptation is the evolution of congee. The film shows Mengju and M packing vinegar to sell alongside congee in her shop. Traditionally, congee was a Chinese dish typically eaten with just a tiny amount of salt for flavor. However, over time, congee has been integrated into Thai cuisine and is often considered a breakfast dish in Thai communities. In Thai society, people commonly season their food with ingredients like fish sauce, ground chili, vinegar, and sugar to suit their personal tastes. This practice has been applied to congee, creating a new way of eating it. As a Sino-Thai second generation, Mengju has reimagined the way congee is eaten by incorporating the Thai practice of adding seasonings. This new way of eating congee exemplifies the essence of the third space, as it is neither purely Thai nor Chinese but rather a hybrid of both cultures.

One more example of the ongoing identity creation in the third space of the second generation is the fact that Mengju breaks free from traditional Chinese beliefs and practices, engaging in a new practice and redefining relationships. As previously mentioned in the introduction, Chinese culture is profoundly influenced by the Confucian notion of filial piety. Confucianism has deeply shaped patriarchal structures by granting male elders absolute

authority and placing wives and children under their control, while tracing lineage through the male line. In this patrilineal family structure, men are assigned public roles, while women—considered the inferior sex—are expected to perform domestic duties, and “sons are valued more than daughters” (Liu et al., 2025, p. 105). The film highlights liberation from traditional Chinese family values as one of its main themes through the issue of inheriting Mengju’s assets. Sew, Mengju’s daughter, never fights to get a share of her mother’s inheritance as she accepts the fate of a daughter who is always neglected by a Chinese family. Meanwhile, the eldest son of the family, Kiang, is confident that he will secure Mengju’s inheritance. That is the reason why he is furious when he learns that Mengju’s money is given to the youngest son, who seems to always have financial problems.

However, even though Mengju decides to give her money to her son, her refusal to stay with her eldest son, who offers to take care of her during her cancer treatment, and her decision to seek refuge with her daughter signals a liberation from traditional Chinese customs. Traditionally, sons are expected to take care of their aging parents (Chen, Zhuoga, & Deng, 2021, p. 2). Mengju’s choice shows the importance of a daughter as a spiritual sanctuary for an elderly parent. In fact, the film conveys this idea from the very beginning by depicting M’s paternal grandfather leaving his fortune to his granddaughter, who quits her job to take care of him during his fatal illness.

Moreover, the film portrays that Mengju herself is trying to break free from this son-preference tradition when she shows up at her older brother’s place to demand her share of their parents’ inheritance. Even though the attempt fails, this incident and her decision to stay with her daughter confirm Mengju’s new cultural identity, which is not tied to the patriarchal family structure of Chinese tradition. Mengju’s brief encounter with her brother and her decision to stay with her daughter instead of her sons serve as a critique of the traditional Chinese family structure that favors males over females. In

this case, it is not sons who are valued but a daughter who embodies diligence and filiality—virtues that Confucianism itself upholds.

Third Generation

The third generation of Sino-Thais, represented by Mengju’s children—Kiang, Sew, and Soei—seems to have adopted a blend of acculturation strategies: integration and assimilation. While this generation reflects the beginning of assimilation into Thai cultural identity, especially in a professional context, they maintain the connection with Chinese cultural identity within the family context.

Langauge. Through language use, the third generation illustrates both integration and assimilation strategies. Like the second generation, they engage in code-mixing, incorporating Thai and Chinese words in sentences. Moreover, the third generation seems to continue the second generation’s phonetic adaptation of Teochew Chinese pronouns “你 (lī)” and “我 (wá),” meaning “You” and “I”, respectively, pronouncing them as ลื้อ (lūi) and อัว (ʔúa). An example of this adaptation occurs in the scene where Kiang talks to Mengju during the meal, saying:

“我 อยู่เล่นไม่ได้นะ เดี่ยวต้องพาเรนโบว์ไปเรียนพิเศษภาษาอังกฤษ
/ʔúa jùː lɛ́n mǎi dǎi nà dīaw t-ŋ p̄hā rén bóbŭ bāi rīan p̄h̄sèt
p̄h̄sǎː ʔīngkɪt/

(I cannot play cards today. I have to take Rainbow to an English extra tutorial class.)

The pronoun, “我 (wá),” pronounced as ʔúa, is integrated into a sentence when Kiang speaks to Mengju. This reflects the integration strategy applied by Sino-Thai characters. Sew, Mengju’s daughter, is also presented as a character who maintains her Chinese cultural identity and adopts the host country’s identity through language. She can translate the Chinese idiom “生米煮成熟饭 (jəŋ1 mi1 t̚su1 t̚ʂəŋ1 su1 fæn1),” which means “the irreversibility

of things or situations that happened” into Thai for her son. The application of the integration strategy illustrates both a sense of belonging within Thai society and the preservation of Chinese identity.

However, the maintenance of the Chinese identity seems to occur primarily within a family context, as the third generation appears to shift to an assimilation strategy when they interact with other people in a professional context. This is illustrated when Sew, as a third-generation Sino-Thai character, uses the standard Thai language when she consults with the doctor about her mother’s health conditions.

Sew: ตอนแรกคุณหมอบอกว่า ทำเคมีแล้วมันจะหาย คุณหมอดูตั้ๆยังคะ

/tɔːn¹ ɛːk¹ khun¹ mɔː¹ bɔk¹ wāː tʰam¹ kʰeːmi¹ ɛːo¹ mən¹
tɕàː hǎːj¹ khun¹ mɔː¹ duː¹ diːj¹ jàŋ¹ kʰáː/

(You told us that the chemotherapy would get rid of the cancer. Is it possible that the results are wrong?)

Doctor: อย่างที่หมอพูดนะครับต้องมีเวลาให้คนไข้เยอะ ๆ

/jàːŋ¹ tʰɔː mɔː pʰúːt ná kʰráp tɕŋ¹ mii wēlāː hâi kʰon kʰài jə jə/

(What I’d recommend is to spend as much time as you can with her.)

This evidence shows that Sew uses the Thai language in a professional context. In her conversation with the doctor, she does not engage in code-mixing between Chinese and Thai but fully adopts the host country’s language, reflecting cultural assimilation. This suggests that the third generation represents a turning point for the Sino-Thai community, where the acculturation process is veering towards assimilation, particularly outside the family domain.

Cultural Practice. The third generation of Sino-Thais represented in the film adopts two acculturation strategies: integration and assimilation. The film presents the integration strategy through the characters’ adherence to Chinese cultural practices while also following Thai ones. Kiang, Sew, and Soei

gradually blend into Thai culture but still follow Chinese cultural traditions, especially in family contexts. These three characters participate in the Qingming festival and ancestral funerals while also integrating some elements of Thai cultural practices. For example, Sew arranges Thai funerary rites at a Thai temple for Mengju's funeral, after which they conclude the ceremony with Chinese ancestral customs at the burial plot. Even though the film does not depict the daily chanting by Buddhist monks, the setting and Mengju's daughter's black shirt imply that this funeral is not entirely Chinese. Mengju's funeral contrasts with the other funeral illustrated earlier in the film, where the close members of the deceased dress in white attire to show their deep mourning (Waters, 1991, p. 114). However, the funeral still reflects the characters' Chinese heritage through the Chinese-style coffin and the practice of guiding the deceased in a casket to a burial plot. Mengju's funeral, to some extent, can be seen as a unique creation of Sino-Thai individuals within their third space.

Another piece of evidence is reflected in the character Soei, whose Thai identity is emphasized by his wearing a Buddhist amulet. This signifies that even though Soei participates in Chinese Qingming with his family, he is also influenced by Thai Buddhist culture. He neither fully assimilates into Thai culture nor rejects his Chinese heritage. Instead, he incorporates Thai religious practices while maintaining some aspects of Chinese culture. This suggests the use of the integration strategy to blend into the host country's culture.

However, the film also portrays the third-generation Sino-Thai as beginning to adopt the assimilation strategy. This is evident in characters like Kiang, who shows hesitation in engaging his wife and daughter in Chinese traditions. For example, he never took his daughter to the Qingming ceremony while Mengju was still alive. Instead, he encourages his family to engage with Thai practices, as shown in the scene where he takes his family to a Buddhist temple. This reflects that Kiang may not want his family to embrace Chinese

customs while encouraging them to adopt the host country's culture, Thai culture, symbolizing a gradual disconnection from Chinese heritage and a stronger connection to Thai Buddhist cultural customs.

In conclusion, while the third-generation characters like Kiang, Sew, and Soei demonstrate a certain degree of integration between Chinese and Thai cultures, they appear to have increasingly shifted their cultural identity to align more closely with Thai culture. This change reflects a transition from integration to assimilation. One possible reason is that the Sino-Thai who were born or raised in the host culture may have been influenced and normalized by its dominant cultural practices.

Fourth Generation

Earlier in the film, the fourth-generation Sino-Thais, represented by M and Rainbow, illustrate the application of the assimilation strategy. These two characters reflect the current situation of many fourth-generation Sino-Thais, who have distanced themselves from their Chinese culture and assimilated more fully into Thai culture. In addition, they embrace cultures other than Thai and Chinese to create their own cultural identity that aligns with what Bhabha refers to as a hybrid identity.

Language. Like the previous two generations, the fourth-generation Sino-Thais represented by the two young characters, M and Rainbow, reflect the application of the assimilation strategy through their language use. They speak only Thai in their daily conversations, reflecting how their linguistic identity has assimilated into Thai culture, where Thai functions as the dominant language for communication and self-expression, permeating all spheres of social interactions and public institutions. This suggests that their communication and self-expression are influenced by Thai culture. For instance, M struggles to understand Mengju's Chinese, even simple words like 谢谢 (zoi siə), which means "thank you," and is unable to guess the

meaning from the context. This demonstrates a lack of Chinese language proficiency. This point is further highlighted in the scene where Mengju uses a Chinese idiom, 生米煮成熟饭 (jəŋ1 mi1 tɕu1 tɕʰəŋ1 su1 fæŋ1), which means “raw rice is now cooked,” during a conversation with M and Sew. M needs translation from his mother, Sew, because he cannot understand the idiom.

The shift in language is also reflected in Rainbow, another fourth-generation character. She demonstrates how she blends into Thai culture by embracing the Thai language, even though she uses the word *ahma*, a Chinese term commonly used by Sino-Thais to refer to their grandmother or an old lady. Rainbow promises to take care of her grandmother when she grows up and becomes a doctor.

Rainbow: โตขึ้นเรนโบว์จะไปเรียนหมอมารักษาอาม่าเองค่ะ

/tóː kʰûn reːn bóʊ tɕì pái rīan mǎː mǎː rák sʰāː ʔāː māː
eːŋg kʰāː/

*(When I grow up, I will study medicine and treat you,
grandmother.)*

Unlike the third generation, the fourth generation of Sino-Thais, like Rainbow, predominantly uses Thai language to communicate within a family domain, whereas the older generations use this space to show their connection to their Chinese culture. This indicates the loss of Chinese roots of this generation, and Rainbow’s use of the word *ahma* (grandmother) in this context is merely a pronoun to refer to her grandmother rather than carrying any deeper cultural significance. Essentially, it reflects a broader trend of cultural assimilation and the loss of traditional Chinese identity among younger Sino-Thai individuals.

Furthermore, the film highlights English language as a significant linguistic influence that may have contributed to the formation of the fourth-generation Sino-Thai identity. This can be regarded as a unique aspect of their

development within their third space. Both Rainbow and M incorporate English language in their sentences in a family setting, which typically serves as a shared space for Sino-Thai individuals from different generations, much like Mengju mixes Chinese and Thai words in her sentences. Even though Rainbow rarely appears on screen, when she does speak, the film showcases her as a girl who primarily communicates in English. For instance, Rainbow greets Mengju in English:

Kiang: นี๋ มาแล้ว

/niː. nīː mǎ ɛːo/

(Grandmother is coming!)

Rainbow: Good morning, Grandma.

Rainbow also greets M on Chinese New Year's Day by saying, "Happy Chinese New Year." This representation demonstrates that Rainbow prefers speaking English over Thai in her social interactions. Her character reflects the tension within the fourth generation as they become more distanced from their cultural roots, particularly the Chinese language, while simultaneously embodying a new identity shaped by the adoption of English. This testifies to the dominance of English as a global language, while Chinese becomes a venacular that is falling out of use.

Cultural Practice. The fourth-generation characters' assimilation strategy is presented through their lack of interest and understanding of the Qingming festival. At the beginning of the film, M is portrayed as a character who disregards the Qingming practice, where people gather at their ancestors' burial plots. He shows his low interest in participating in the festival by focusing on his mobile game and scrolling his phone during the festival.

M's reluctant participation may not imply that he does not commemorate his ancestors. He may simply hold a different belief about the deceased, as he says, "อาจขึ้น Cloud ไปแล้ว (ʔaː.kɔːŋ kʰɯ̃n klɔːd paj ɛo)," meaning that his grandfather is in cloud storage. He likely believes that his

ancestors do not physically exist after death but rather exist elsewhere, much like data stored in the cloud. Therefore, he may feel that it is unnecessary to make offerings of food and flowers for his ancestors.

To some extent, M's belief illustrates the tension between traditional Chinese views of the afterlife and the modern perspective of a non-believer who sees death as the end. Over time, he becomes more accepting of Chinese traditional values. This internal conflict within M becomes more explicit at the end of the story when he decides to fulfill his grandmother's wish by having her rest in the Chinese burial plot. He uses the money Mengju had saved for him to purchase a large burial plot for her. Ultimately, he chooses to honor Mengju's wish rather than prioritize his own personal desires. The decision underscores the interplay between traditional Chinese values and modern values that might lead to the reinterpretation and reconstruction of the fourth-generation cultural identity.

However, even though the assimilation strategy adopted by the fourth-generation Sino-Thai is evident throughout the film, the potential for reconnection to the Chinese heritage is hinted at the end. The final scene of the movie depicts M guiding Rainbow, his younger cousin, on how to properly scatter flowers over the mound at their grandmother's burial plot—a practice that M disregarded in the very first scene, where he carelessly dumps the flowers at their ancestors' burial plot, much to his grandma's dismay. The transformation encapsulates M's evolution from showing little interest in the Qingming festival to becoming a role model for Rainbow, demonstrating how to respectfully honor their grandmother with flower offerings.

This evolution suggests a re-adoption of Chinese heritage by the younger Sino-Thais, challenging Skinner's (1957) assimilation theory. The theory posits that the assimilation rate for the Sino-Thai population is anticipated to stay elevated; potentially, there will not be the fourth generation of the Sino-Thai as this generation will become Thais through the

assimilation process. Instead, as the film shows, the fourth-generation Sino-Thai's re-adoption of the Chinese backgrounds portrays an opportunity to construct a new cultural identity that harmonizes modern values, Thai traditions, and their Chinese heritage. Drawing upon Bernards's (2018) study on popular Sino-Thai integration narratives, this study argues that *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* falls neither into the assimilationist narrative—where descendants of Chinese immigrants are fully assimilated into Thai culture—nor the bicultural accommodation narrative, in which Thai and Chinese remain entirely distinct spheres. Instead, the film highlights “creolization,” or the creation of a third space, which reflects “the dynamic, formational process of culture and language through localization, adaptation, and exchange” (p. 175).

Conclusion

Using Berry's acculturation theory and Bhabha's concept of the third space, this article explores the dynamics of cultural acculturation and identity formation of Sino-Thai individuals portrayed in *How to Make Millions before Grandma Dies*. While it applies acculturation theory to identify the strategies adopted by three generations of Sino-Thai individuals to blend into Thai society, it uses the third space concept to provide insights into the negotiations of various cultural influences that actively shape Sino-Thai individuals' cultural identities.

Through an acculturation lens, the results illustrate that Sino-Thai characters undergo changes in their identities that draw upon linguistic elements and social practices from both Thai and Chinese cultures. They also employ different acculturation strategies. The second generation, represented by the grandmother, uses the integration strategy, mixing her Chinese heritage language and religious beliefs with Thai and Buddhist practices. This balancing or mixing, particularly her code-switching mode of communication, reflects

her hybrid Thai-Chinese identity. In contrast, the third generation, represented by the grandmother's three children, appears to use both integration and assimilation strategies. While they adopt the integration strategy in familial contexts, mixing both Chinese and Thai linguistic and cultural elements, they exhibit a strategy of assimilation in professional contexts, where Thai norms of speaking prevail. This in-between state signifies the hybrid cultural identity of the third generation. In contrast, the fourth generation shows a higher level of assimilation than the third, having abandoned the Chinese language and more fully blended into the Thai community. This is evident in their diminished engagement with Chinese cultural practices and their increased use of English and secular practices.

However, while the results may suggest a decline in Chinese cultural identity and a continued interaction with Thai culture as the host culture and the linear progression of acculturation process from integration to assimilation, it is extremely important to note that the movie, which revolves around the learning process and developing mutual understanding between M and his grandma, demonstrates that cultural identities are always in flux—constantly evolving in response to societal changes and individual experiences. This is particularly evident toward the end of the movie when grandma, representing the second generation, comes to accept her daughter as equally important as her first son, challenging the long-standing patriarchal ideology in Chinese culture and embracing the universal value of equality. Moreover, the final scene, where M is captured alongside Rainbow on their grandmother's burial site, suggests the possibility of the fourth generation re-engaging with Chinese cultural practices. This leaves room for the audience's imagination regarding how the fourth generation and those that follow will reshape their identities, given that it is completely impossible to abandon their heritage or escape the ghost of their grandma. This third space remains to be constructed.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. As the article focuses solely on language and cultural practices—two distinct realms that illustrate the acculturation process and hybrid identity of Sino-Thai characters, it does not examine how capitalism, which is one of the central issues in the film, contributes to identity construction. Gender is also only briefly addressed. Future research should offer a more in-depth analysis of how capitalism and gender shape the acculturation process and examine additional characters beyond the scope of this paper who might complicate the article’s central arguments.

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