

'Turning Red': The power of representation

Sandra Oh, Rosalie Chiang discuss Asian-led coming-of-age Disney and Pixar film

By Peter Sblendorio
New York Daily News

The stars of "Turning Red" believe a movie about a girl who turns into a red panda has a chance to be transformative.

Sandra Oh and Rosalie Chiang are thrilled to be a part of the coming-of-age Disney and Pixar flick that centers on an Asian Canadian teenager named Mei Lee and her family.

"Hopefully this film ... gives the experience to (people) just like Mei that you are the hero, a 13-year-old Chinese girl is a hero," Oh, 50, told the Daily News.

"For someone like myself, and my generation, we did not see ourselves in the center of the story, or the hero, and the fact that we have a lot more



Pixar
Meilin (voiced by Rosalie Chiang) in a scene from the Pixar movie "Turning Red." The movie is streaming on Disney+.

stories that are diverse, it just includes more people and it also makes storytelling just much more interesting."

The animated film, out Friday on Disney+, introduces Mei as a high-achieving middle schooler in Toronto whose ancestors had

a mystical connection with red pandas. She suddenly starts transforming into the animal whenever she becomes overly excited, presenting new challenges even as she grapples with the complications of growing up.

"When I was younger, I never really saw a coming-of-age film starring an Asian girl," said Chiang, 16, who voices Mei.

"When I watched coming-of-age films, I never was able to really relate to the character," she said. "However with this, there were so many instances where I was like, 'That's my life! I literally experienced that last week with my mom! My mom and I looked at each other kind of like, 'This is oddly similar.' I think that's the beauty."

The film explores the complex dynamic between Mei and her mother, Ming, who has high expectations for her daughter.

"This movie is just about her navigating through life," Chiang said of Mei. "She's trying so hard. She's going through all these changes, and especially her relationship with her mother is changing. Before this movie, things were so much simpler, but then you throw in this giant red panda."

"Turning Red" is co-written and directed by longtime Pixar filmmaker Domee Shi, who drew from her own experiences growing up as a Chinese Canadian girl in Toronto. Shi previously directed the 2019

Oscar-winning Pixar short film "Bao."

Oh, who voices Ming, believes anyone can relate to the story told in "Turning Red."

"It has a lot of love in it, and it has a lot of anger in it," Oh said. "There's a scene when Mei is in the bathroom with her friends, and Mei is starting to say, 'Listen, I have done this for her, I'm perfect, I'm this,' and it's just like, enough of it," said Oh — a Golden Globes winner for the series "Grey's Anatomy" and "Killing Eve."

"That is so perfect, because on the other side, there's Ming just going, 'Why is she talking to me this way? Who does she think she is? I'm her mother.' I just think that represents, very realistically, this time in a young person's life."

The actors say the red panda represents many different parts of a person's life, with Oh listing "puberty, sexuality, doing things wrong, depression" and anxiety as a few.

"It's very interesting, when we hear from people, (to hear) every person's very different take on what the panda is to them," Oh said. "But I'd say, to maybe sum it up, messiness and change."

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