

Chinese-American Liminality in Everything, Everywhere All at Once (2022): Between Violence and Wu Wei

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ABSTRACT

Diasporas are often said to live in “two worlds”. The conflicting relationship between their physical and mental states results in a fissure where symbolic and physical violence become the main drive for diaspora to survive. This violence comes not only due to these diaspora’s own inner conflicts, but also due to the discrepancies between their native and internalized culture with the external norms and values that surround them in their current stay. The theme of diaspora and violence has been recurrent in American cinematic representation. As the most recent example, an independent film entitled Everything, Everywhere All at Once delves into this issue by incorporating a storyline of a Chinese-diasporic family in the United States who encounters various problems regarding their cultural differences to their surroundings. This article seeks to examine the cultural dynamics only of Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy in the film’s storyline amidst the abundance of multiversal plot points that serve as the pivotal exposition in the film. The analyses are textually grounded based on Homi Bhabha’s notion of liminality and contextually on the differing conception of violence in Chinese and American contexts respectively. This article draws from a Taoist concept of Wu wei to interpret the latter point. This study finds that the film represents diasporic characters within a liminal space that forces them to produce their own “maneuver” in order to survive. The parental problems that Evelyn has with Joy as well as her familial and ideological problems with Waymond are found to be propelled by such culturally-laden maneuvers. The film then can be read as an allegory of Chinese-American diaspora’s liminal experience in the United States. This allegory contains an ethical stance where the idea of non-violence (wu wei) becomes the utopian message of the film.

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1. Introduction

Crudely interpreted, diaspora is a group of individuals whose present residence or Host country is different from their geographical origin of birth or simply known as their native residence (Délano & Gamlen, 2014). The convention of the geographical border here is understood as a nation-scale limitation. On the other hand, speaking from the vantage point of cultural and postcolonial studies, Bhabha defines diaspora and their experience of living separately from their homeland as a “community-in-discontinuity” (2004, p. 285). The discontinuity here refers to both cultural practices done by diaspora as well as their way of grasping the temporality of reality. The birth of hybridity as a result of continuous mobility by diaspora leads to the groundlessness felt by the diasporic subjects, in which they feel to be “homeless” and entrapped at the same time in a liminal space (Arrigo et al., 2011; Bhabha, 2004, pp. 165, 212). Synthesizing the stalal point of view of diaspora as presented by Délano and Gamlen and postcolonial lens by Bhabha results in an understanding of diaspora as a group of individuals who live outside their homeland and experience an inevitable conflict for the differences that they feel and bring into their new environment.

Representation of diaspora can often be found in modern cinematic landscape. The cross-cultural substance contained in diasporic stories serves as the focal point of the narrative, in which this notion is the key of relevance for international audiences (Carrigan & White, 2012, p. 375). Bringing elements of diaspora into cinema places films into a contextually bounded art form, rather than simply treats them with an art-for-art approach which results in a closed and structural analysis (do Nascimento, 2019). This idea is in line with the general conception of film as a cultural practice

laden with signs that seek to evoke a polysemous communication between a film's narratives to culturally-bounded viewers (Shaw, 2017). The bond between particular culture and its representation through cinema results in a sedimentation of that culture's image within the viewers' mind. This sedimentation or frame of reference can result in an in-depth understanding of that particular culture or, regrettably, a superficial imagery of what that particular culture really is. Through this sociological paradigm, a particular film that carries specific cultural practices and values is best be interpreted within the contextual framework of the origin as well as the current actuality of the cultural elements that are represented in that particular film.

The notion of sedimentation of meaning towards particular culture in respect to cinematic representation can be seen from the projection of "Asian-American" narratives in Hollywood cinematic landscape. As one of the biggest producers of Asian-American cinematic narratives, Hollywood films often imbue the identity of Asian-American culture with the idea of violence, both physically and symbolically. This case is especially present when the Asian-American characters are construed to be diaspora in the American land (Szeto, 2011, p. 96). The popular link between Asian-American with physical violence is construed through the importation of Hong Kong and Chinese martial art narratives into Hollywood production. Elements of martial arts become the hypogram of 'popular' Asian-American films in Hollywood. This can be seen in a decennial categorization: the 1990s as represented by John Woo's filmography, early 2000s as shown through the popularity of Quentin Tarantino's duology of *Kill Bill* and Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, late 2000s and early as well as mid 2010s through *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy (Nama, 2021; Yang, 2018), and one of the newest examples of David Leitch's *Bullet Train* (2022). These examples do not mean that elements of martial arts are a false representation of Asian-American culture in Hollywood, but rather this article argues that they simply offer a fragment of the complex ideas of violence in the Asian-American context, let alone its culture in the broadest sense.

The second notion of symbolic violence is an under-discussed element of the representation of violence in Asian-American films produced by Hollywood. This idea revolves around the comprehension of an act of covert violence articulated through language that is agreed upon in a given social setting (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 51). One of the most popular Asian-American films that is rich with examples of symbolic violence exertions is Jon M. Chu's adaptation of Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Although this film focuses on a cliché conflict based on social and economic status, it also digs deeper into a typical trait of symbolic violence exertions towards diasporic characters who are seen to be the "problem" within the story (Sugino, 2019; Tse, 2021). Having said that, the representation of diasporic characters in Hollywood cinema—specifically Chinese-Americans as the main context of this article—is loaded with the idea of violence.

The relation between violence and Asian-American subjects in Hollywood cinema finds its newest iteration through Daniels' *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* (2022). This film was released on March 25th, 2022 in the United States and June 22nd, 2022 in Indonesia. This film is produced by an American independent production house, A24. The plot of the film revolves around a story of a middle-aged Chinese-American woman named Evelyn who lives with his husband, Waymond, and her father, Gong Gong, in San Fernando, California. This diasporic family runs a laundromat and encounters a tax problem with the IRS regarding the laundromat's business operation. Besides the financial problem that thrusts the film's plot, the story also includes Evelyn's conflicts with her lesbian daughter, Joy. All of these problems in the film are presented in a multiversal world-building. The complexity of the story as well as the utilization of a multiversal aesthetic leads to the success of the film both critically and financially (D'Alessandro, 2022).

There has not been any studies about *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* in the academic realm. The lack of previous studies regarding this object is rational due to the brief interval between the film's release date and the time of writing of this article. However, there have been several online news articles that discuss the relevance of the film's plot from a philosophical standpoint. Huynh (2022) opines that the film reflects a Buddhist value of compassion that refutes a total nihilistic worldview as the proper way of seeing life. He continues to explain, albeit in an utmost general sense, that the West audiences fail to recognize the philosophical layer of the film and solely focus on the multiversal style. Cheng (2022), on the other hand, sees the film's conflict to be in line with an Afro-pessimist aesthetic in cinema, in which this particular genre discusses the resulted nihilism and resistance of diasporic individuals due to the inequality that they get in their place of living. Both Huynh and Cheng's articles give a prominent foundation for this article's contextual layers, namely religious and societal contexts.

In an attempt to synthesize these two contexts within a critical discussion of the film—as well as initiating an outset for a viable interpretation of this film—this article seeks to examine the film's sociological facet by focusing on its narrativity regarding Evelyn's family cultural dynamic (limited only to Evelyn's relationship with Joy and Waymond, resulting in the film's multiversal narrative structure as well as fantastical elements to be out of the picture) and its

conception of violence. The latter idea is tied up to the argument of this article as articulated beforehand, that is, the image of Asian-American (including Chinese-American as the background for the film's characters) is constantly linked to the idea of physical and symbolic violence. In examining this particular issue of violence, this article correlates the film's representation of violence to a Taoist concept of *wu wei* (Laozi & Roberts, 2001). This link is a continuation of Michie's interpretation of the film's narrative that is parallel to a Taoist way-of-life principle (2022). On the other hand, the former focus regarding Evelyn's family cultural dynamic is theoretically rooted in the idea of liminality. This notion employed here is taken from Bhabha's idea of diasporic subjects, who are often seen to inhabit liminal space and become liminal subjects themselves (Bhabha, 2004). Their deprived state of living in a Host country that is highly differentiated to their native cultural values and practices leaves them caught up in an endless in-between dimension, thus leaving them vulnerable for cultural conflicts (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 5, 74).

There have been several socio-textual analyses that utilize Bhabha's postcolonial vista in deciphering Asian narratives. For example, a reading of a film which has been mentioned earlier, Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asian*, by Wong (2022) presents a result of that the film's visual representation and narrativity project an ambivalent identity of diasporic Asians who are Asian but not-Asian at the same time (or as Wong groups it as American-Asian). Here Wong emphasizes the problematic of purity that Rachel Chu, the main character who is a Chinese diasporic, faces throughout the story. The film's ending which signifies an acceptance by Nick's mother towards Rachel is read to be an ambiguous hybridization in Nick's family as a whole. This point is similar to Yu's postcolonial study towards Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* that concludes the film's ending to signify a clear—rather than ambiguous such as Yu's reading towards *Crazy Rich Asians*—acceptance of cultural hybridization (2019). Lastly, in the related studies discussed here, a postcolonial study by Velasco and De Chavez (2021) examines the trail of cultural anxiety felt by Filipino's native towards Chinese diaspora in Philippine through a Filipino film entitled *Feng Shui* directed by Chito Rono. Differing from the two prior mentioned studies, Velasco and De Chavez find that *Feng Shui* projects a cultural dynamic of Filipino's hostility towards Chinese diaspora which results in a continuous hysteresis of Chinese subjects in Philippine. The differences that can be found by using Bhabha's lens are then hoped to be able to strengthen this writing's freshness in specific to the deciphering of *Everything, Everywhere All at Once*.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative method to analyze the issues at stake. The approach taken here was a narrative and non-narrative approach, specifically a sociological vantage point in interpreting both elements of the approach. This vantage point offers an outlook of interpretation that is based upon the film's contextual aspect (its spatial and temporal socio-political climate) as well as the narrativity itself (the significance of the series of events within the plot of the film, hereafter mentioned as *fabula* to borrow a narratological concern) (Kersten & Verboord, 2014). This crisscross attempt towards textuality and contextuality here is best understood in a Jamesonian spirit of cognitive mapping, in which the sociological context of a particular cultural product is not understood to be a final totality but rather a fragment of an-already reified social truth (Jameson, 2013, p. 74). The data consisted of two types, namely primary and secondary. The primary data here consisted of the scenes and dialogues contained within the film, whilst the secondary data were articles (both academic and news) that serve as the contextual aspect of the film and the philosophical concept of *wu wei*.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Cultural Clash in *Everything, Everywhere All at Once*

It is fitting to start the analysis through an utmost visible theme of the film, that is, the cultural dynamics as posed within the film's story. In the first part (or best be substituted with "act") of the film entitled "Everything", the multifaceted problems that are faced by Evelyn are expository. Simple things such as familial or domestic problems (Evelyn and Waymond's arguing over who should put the tablecloth on and paint the ceiling; Evelyn's murmuring due to the fact that she has to cook more due to an unexpected arrival of Becky as a guest; these two become solid examples) have already been laid out in the first 5 minutes of the film. Whilst commonly the establishing sequence of a film is a spatial priority (Carrigan & White, 2012, p. 144), this film opens its journey by combining space, subjects, and time simultaneously. This can be seen in a figure below which signifies that the film's playfulness on the concept of temporality is not only narratively told, but also cinematically coded from the very beginning.

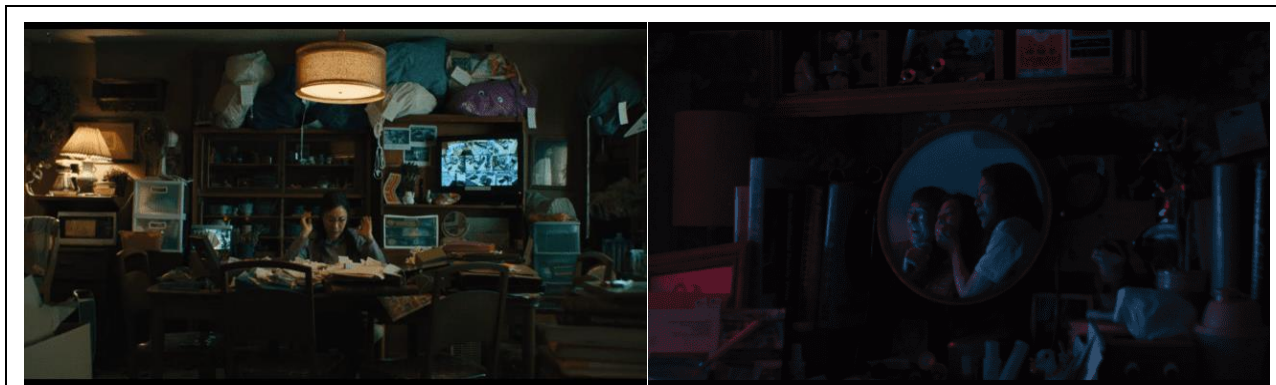


Figure 1. Waymond, Joy, and Evelyn are shown to sing together on the left picture (past in the fabula), whilst Evelyn on the right picture (in the present time of the fabula) is shown to deal with excessing jobs in a messy space.

The difference between the state of the past and the present shows a “nostalgic” attitude that the narrative employs. It means that the past is affirmatively construed as ideal compared to a depressing past (Radstone 2010; for specific use of nostalgia in films see Jameson 2013, 115). This characteristic also accentuates that the problems the main character is facing in the present of the fabula revolve around her ways of dealing with time. Her process in facing such temporal horizon is indeed culturally bounded. It then can be read in Bhabha’s postcolonial gaze, specifically in regards to the nature of diasporic subjects such as Evelyn here, that this particular characteristic of Evelyn (as well as the film’s attitude as reflected in this beginning) in seeing such temporal aspects is a reflection of *mise en abyme*, that is, a narrative composition that treats diasporic subjects to live in an abyss as a consequence for their inability to transcend the dualism of the present and the past (Bhabha, 2004, p. 110).

Moving on from small and trivial detail above, the first act of the film also exposit one central theme of familial clash based upon cultural differences of Evelyn and Joy. In the film it is characterized that Joy is a rebellious daughter who has many disagreements with Evelyn (in the way she dresses, talks, and behaves in general). Evelyn’s rigid standards towards Joy is laden with what Hillenbrand describes as “Asian American excellence” culture which becomes a structural pattern of representing Asian-American (mostly Chinese) way of parenting in American cinema (2008). This inevitable generational disagreement is intensified within the film as Evelyn shows her strong disagreement towards Joy’s sexual orientation, in which in the film Joy is depicted to have a same-sex romantic relationship with Becky. Evelyn’s stance towards Joy’s relationship is different to Waymond as a father, where he expresses his pleasure in meeting Becky,

Hi, Becky! Thank you for coming. Please call me Waymond. Here, sit. (timestamp 00:04:14 – 00:04:19)

On the other hand, Evelyn shows her initial disagreement through a culturally-bounded expression below,

You know, he doesn't have to stay ... I always mix up 'he', 'she' ... In Chinese, just one word - 'ta' - so easy. I'm sure I'm not the only one calling him 'he'. I mean 'her', 'him'. Ugh (00:14:19 – 00:14:36)

The way which Evelyn incorporates the Chinese understanding of pronouns signifies her partiality towards Chinese culture (including language) in comparison to American culture in general (or English lexicon in specific). This characteristic recalls Wong’s analysis towards *Crazy Rich Asians* where she describes Mrs. Young’s (ironically played by the very same Michelle Yeoh as Evelyn) selective trait as imposing a pure, authentic Asian manner (2022). Evelyn’s stance thus pits Joy as something “Other” to Evelyn, an “alien” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 111) that orbits around Evelyn’s ontological truth.

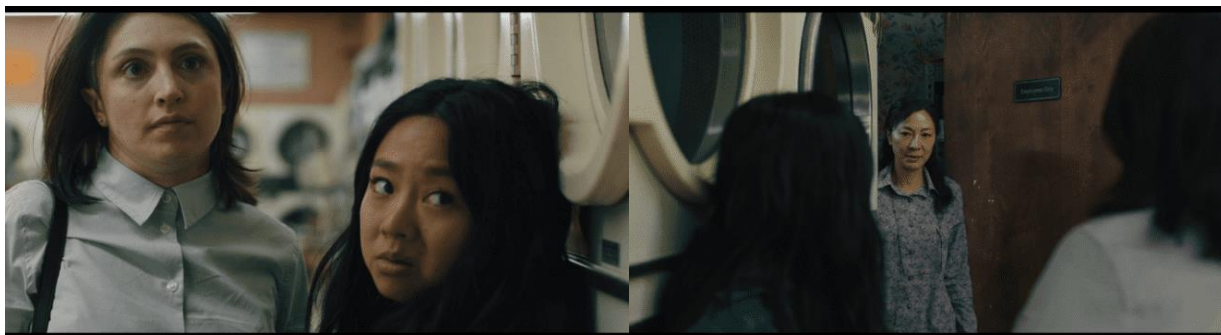


Figure 2. Becky and Joy on the left, Evelyn on the right

Another element that becomes a fundamental factor of cultural differences between Evelyn and Joy is racial status. Evelyn states that her disagreement towards Becky is not only due to the fact of her volition in a same-sex relationship, but also to the fact that she is a “white girl” (timestamp 00:05:43). This does not mean that Evelyn is characterized as a racist person—for the benchmark of such accusation in cinematic decoding is problematic and leads to wildly superficial analysis—but rather a complex character. Accentuating on her complexity leads to the most important of “why” and “how” rather than simply pointing out the “what”. Evelyn continues her argument by stating that her disagreement lies substantively in her concern towards Gong Gong, her father who is about to come from China in the beginning of the story.

But Gong Gong, his heart cannot take it, ... You want him to come all the way from China to die like that? (timestamp 00:05:54 – 00:06:07)

It is then clear that Evelyn’s concern of Joy’s relationship does not stem from her own prejudice, but rather from her insecurity of how her father’s reception might be. In here, a hereditary parental-relationship problem becomes the main drive of the film. It is, once again, defining a characteristic of Asian-American parenting in American cinema (Han, 2021; Hillenbrand, 2008). If previous reading sees Evelyn’s rigid standard as a layer of her advocacy for authentic Chineseness (a term used by Chow 1998), this authenticity then can be concretely equated through the manifestation of Gong Gong. Pure Chineseness lies in the very image of Gong Gong.



Figure 3. Gong Gong's first appearance where he meets Evelyn, Joy, and Becky (timestamp 00:09:40 - 00:10:15)

Here above can be seen how Gong Gong's criticism towards Joy's ability to speak Chinese resembles Evelyn's characteristic of Chinese purity. Without getting deeper on psychoanalytic projection, it is best be interpreted concisely that Evelyn's way of life draws its manifestation from Gong Gong. The figure above also shows the culmination of Evelyn's attempt of rejecting Joy's same sex relationship by stating that Becky is only a "good friend" to Joy. Evelyn then doubles down her standard imposition towards Joy by criticizing her, "*You have to try and eat healthier. You are getting fat!*" (timestamp 00:11:01 – 00:11:05)



Figure 3. Joy is seen crying after her conversation with Evelyn (timestamp 00:11:40)

From the quotations of the timestamps in this section, it can be seen how the delivery of the film's cultural theme is done in a rapid rate. The first part, "Everything", lasts for approximately 1 hour and a half from the film's total runtime of 2 hours and 19 minutes. To sum it up succinctly, the first part deals with Evelyn's journey in mastering multiverse-bodily leaps in order to beat Jobu Tupaki, an alternate character of Joy in a more technologized environment (Alphaverse). In this journey, Evelyn is accompanied and trained by multiversal personages of Waymond and Gong Gong. The multiversal structure always pits Evelyn, as an instant Proppian hero (for structuralist conception of hero see Propp 1968, 25), with Jobu Tupaki. Thus, in a quick Freudian allegorical turn, it can be interpreted how the film fundamentally reproduces mother-daughter problems in multiversal manifestations that serve as the aesthetic quality of the film (which also includes its temporal playfulness). The basis for these various forms of the problems is, as this article argues, a cultural difference between Evelyn and Joy. A basis in which is as important as the aesthetic quality of the discussed film.

The cultural clash between Evelyn and Joy can be unionized into a single dichotomy of Chineseness/Americanism. Much to Gong Gong's standard of proper Chinese language, Evelyn duplicates her father's standards and projects them towards Joy. One reading of passivity then would expect Joy to continue the tradition of duplicating parental standard which is laden with cultural variable here. However, unexpected to Evelyn, Joy breaks this tradition and chooses to live in her own "authentic" way. An existentialist reading would invoke a freewill out of limbo in interpreting it, but Bhabha's postcolonial reading would offer an ontological reasoning of such epistemological matter. This ontological reasoning is the fact that both Evelyn and Joy are entrapped in a liminal space, albeit differently. Evelyn faces a dilemma on having to choose either honoring her father's way of life or letting her daughter to be free, whilst Joy is pressurized between adhering to her mother's standard or choosing absolute freedom (nihilistically represented through "The Bagel"). Both characters project distinct strategy to be free from such liminality. Evelyn chooses to pick the authentic Chineseness as her way of life, whilst Joy picks absolute freedom of The Bagel. Both choices can be seen as improper ways of gaining freedom from such liminality, where Bhabha states that to be free from liminality one "requires movement and maneuver, but it does not require a temporality of continuity or accumulation; it requires direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism." (2004, p. 185). Evelyn and Joy's ways of getting out from liminality they inhabit are simply moving on from one master to the other. Their distinct maneuvers project an absolute teleological closure. Rather than interpreting Joy as an unclear diaspora (not Chinese and not America), it is better to see her as an absolute American in this problem. An identity which is impossible for Evelyn to convert.

The continuous problem that Evelyn and Joy are facing does actually resolve satisfactorily, but in its journey an abundant of violent instances are manifested as the effect of such culturally-problematic causality. The next section will discuss specifically to the conception of violence in the film, both physical and symbolic, as presented by Evelyn's relationship with Waymond and Joy. By also incorporating the climax of the film, this article argues that the frenetic instances of violence in the film are paradoxically anti- or non-violence in their nature. It should be noted though that the next section still deals with the textuality of the film, wherein the contextuality (a synthesis) will be given subsequently.

3.2. Advocacy for Non-violence (*Wu wei*) through the Representation of Violence

As has already been mentioned in the preceding sections, representing issues of diaspora subjects in cinematic landscape, specifically American cinematic landscape which becomes the contextual layer of the discussion, always involves the notion of violence. Violence here is described in its complexity, in which it does not always manifest in physical alteration but tends to appear covertly through the daily uses of language (Bourdieu, 1991). *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* continues this tradition of representing violence as felt by diasporic subjects (Evelyn, Waymond, Joy) in the Host country. However, distinct from the usual representation of violence presented towards diasporic subjects by the Host subjects or natives (for example the discussion of Moslem diasporas in the United States by Clini 2015), *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* focuses more on the turbulent dynamics within the scope of Evelyn's family as diasporas themselves.

The preceding section has discussed Evelyn's disagreement with Joy in terms of Joy's behavior and sexual orientation in general to be the manifestation of "diasporic maneuvers" that result in growing discrepancy between them. Contextualizing their rocky relationship under the discussion of violence seeks for textual evidence which exhibit the manifestation of both physical violence and symbolic violence. It has already been clear that the film utilizes highly choreographed and idiosyncratic action sequences that serve as the film's focal aesthetic strength. These sequences can also be read as a continuation of action trope within Asian-American (and Chinese-American as well to be specific) narrative in American cinematic landscape (Szeto, 2011). Thus, without getting into an interpretive attempt towards the details of all of the idiosyncratic action sequences in the film, it should be affirmed that these action sequences are projections of directorial and cinematographic creativities at stake rather than some mythological or ideological feast (though possible, but not always viable).

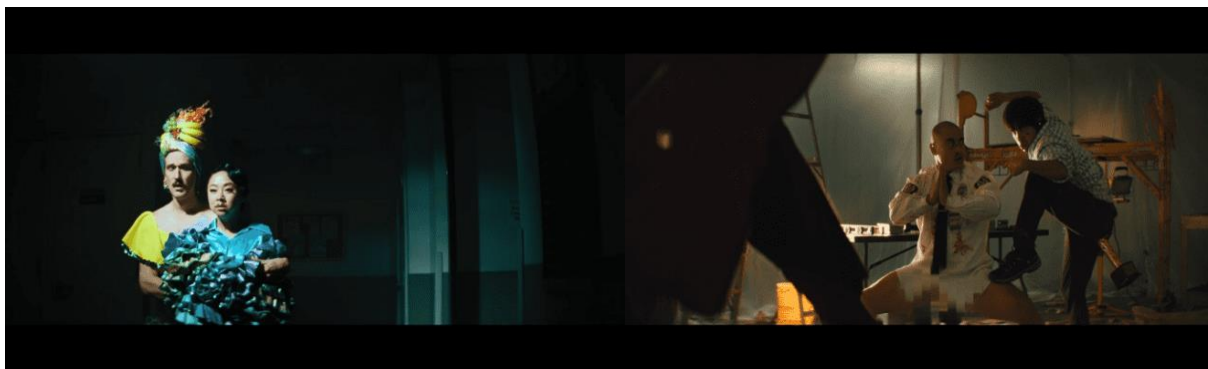


Figure 4. Two examples of the film's bizarre action sequences

On the left it can be seen that one of Jobu Tupaki's powers is to alter reality as she wishes, where in that particular sequence she alters the reality into a somewhat balletic scenario. On other hand, the right picture shows two characters who have to undergo a wild "ritual" (as it can be seen through the hammer and the pantless guy) to possess new skills for their already-multiversal body. These two examples serve as an argument for the reading of the film's way of presenting physical violence as an aesthetic significance.

The thematic significance, on the other hand, which becomes the film's soul here is the manifestation of symbolic violence uttered by Evelyn towards Waymond and Joy respectively. First, it will be Evelyn's relationship with Joy that is discussed here. In the previous section, it has been mentioned briefly how Evelyn has a firm stance regarding Joy's sexual orientation that becomes a fear for Evelyn. Her conflation regarding pronoun (*You know, he doesn't have to stay ... I always mix up 'he', 'she' ... In Chinese, just one word - 'ta' - so easy. I'm sure I'm not the only one calling him 'he'. I mean 'her', 'him'*) is an utmost visible symbolic violence exertion by her since she inserts her background (*Chinese*) to be her foundation in constructing the dichotomy of what is right/wrong. The inclusion of cultural or social background (*habitus* or disposition) in a discursal argument is a covert form of violence that adheres to what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic' (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 24–25). Though only symbolically, this form of violence leads to a concrete effect for the addressed, Joy, as can be seen in figure 3 as well as in the entirety of the film where Joy or Jobu Tupaki wreaks havoc and campaigns her nihilistic Bagel as the true way of life. Evelyn also shows her disdain towards Joy and Becky's way of dressing, where she says in the beginning, "*And the way you two are dressed ... I'm sure I'm not the only calling him 'he'*". Other than the issue surrounding sexuality, this particular notion of fashion manifests Joy's rebellious nature in the many appearances of Jobu Tupaki with over-the-top looks.

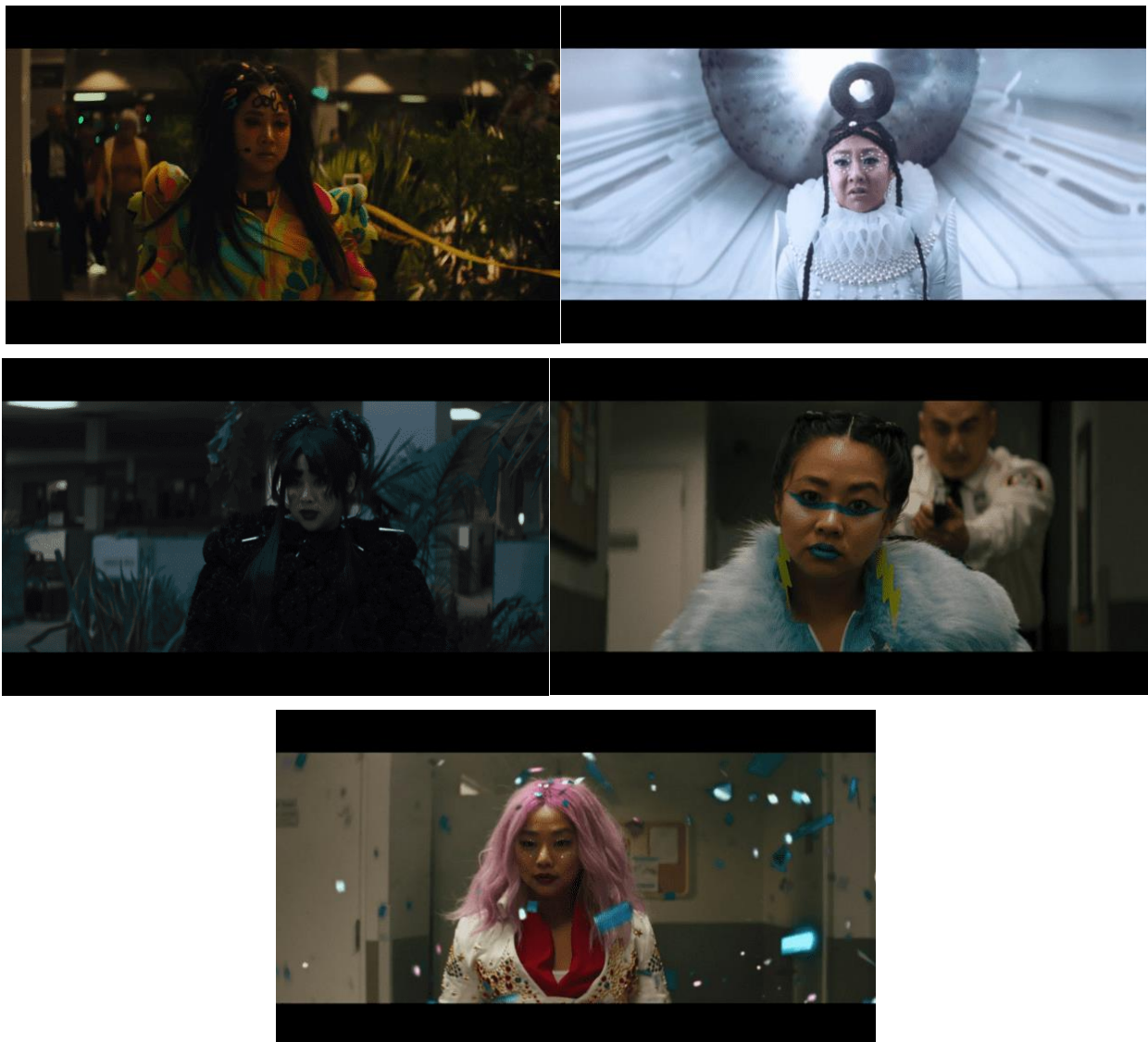


Figure 6. Various looks of Joy or Jobu Tupaki

As Evelyn expresses her dislike towards Joy's appearance in the first part ("Everything"), Joy through the many appearances of Jobu Tupaki distances further from Evelyn's standard. Or, as this article argues, Joy expands her in-betweenness identity (Bhabha, 2004, p. 13) further into the limbo of the Bagel. At these particularities, she is neither Chinese nor American. Her various styles can be read as her conformity to the "unruly" part of the cultural dimension she physically inhabits (Bhabha, 2004, p. 107). Thus, through the enactment of symbolic violence, Evelyn further pushes Joy into an anonymity rather than successfully converting her either into authentic Chineseness or wretched Americanism. The Bagel is then not only representing nihilism (Huynh, 2022; Michie, 2022), but also Joy's lack of identity due to the culturally-laden pressure given by Evelyn within the binary operation of Chineseness/Americanism.

The conflict revolving around violence also occurs within the relationship between Evelyn and Waymond. In the film, it is told that Waymond seeks to divorce Evelyn for he thinks that it is the right choice to provide Evelyn with happiness. It is implied that Waymond perceives his existence only bringing more issues for Evelyn and constraining her potentiality. One of the main drive for this conflict is their differing perception on how to "fight" in their life. The word "fight" here does not only refer to physicality, but also to fight for their existence as diaspora.

Evelyn and Waymond are distinctively characterized although they have the same cultural background. Evelyn is represented as an assertive character with rather grumpy personality, whilst Waymond is construed as an emphatic character who has a bubbly manner. The first distinction can be seen through Waymond's gracious conversation with Becky. It is also told how Waymond loves to bring Deidre—an IRS agent who audits Evelyn and Waymond's

laundromat—cookies as a sign of friendliness (*Don't forget these cookies, Miss Deidre really likes them*; timestamp 01:27:55). In the overall fabula of the main universe of Evelyn, Waymond is construed in such naivety. This is rather different compared to other versions of him who are depicted as technological savant and dashing in the film's intertextual moment towards Wong Kar-Wai's cinema.

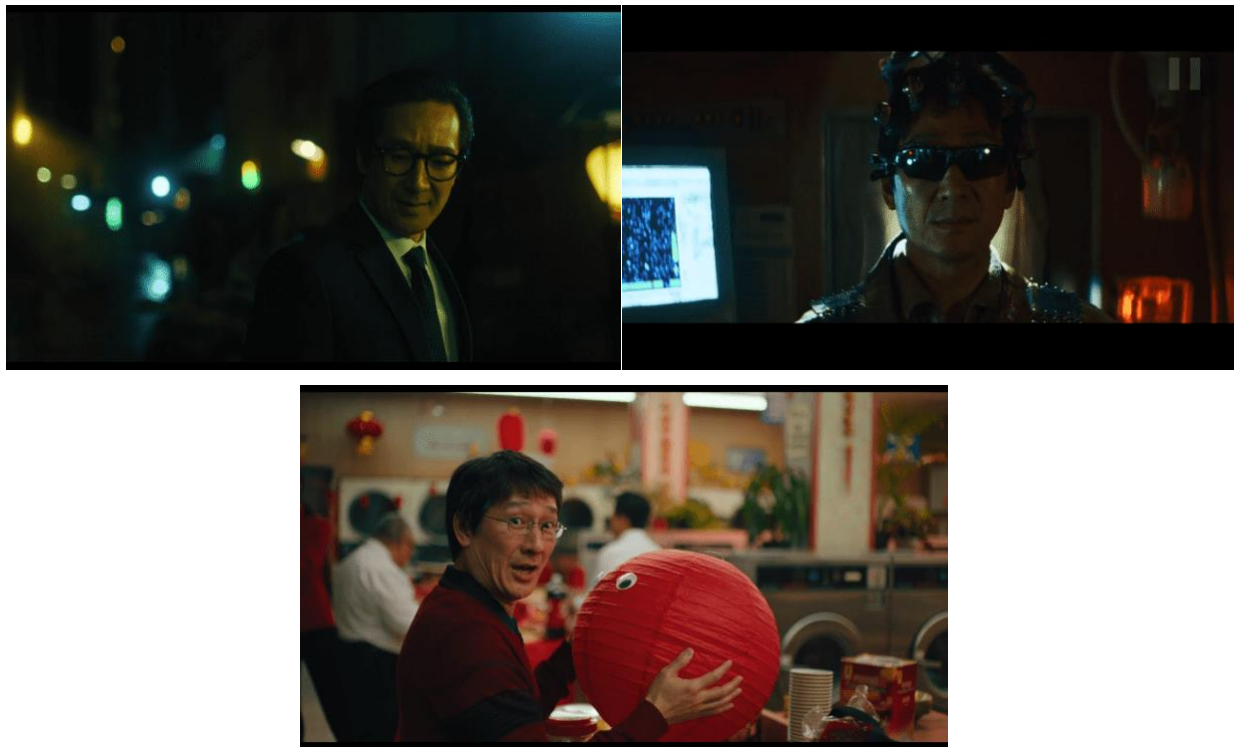


Figure 7. Three versions of Waymond

It is expressed in the film that the naive version of Waymond is initially criticized by Evelyn (multiple expressions of *silly husband* by Evelyn). Evelyn's relationship nature is different to the two other versions of Waymond, wherein the futuristic one becomes Evelyn's teacher (as well as the actantial helper in the fabula) and the dapper one entangles to Evelyn in a Wong Kar-Wai's romantic and melancholic trope. Putting the "ordinary" Waymond as a problematical aspect in Evelyn's path leads to an interpretation where amidst the abundance of violent and multiversal-fantastical acts, Waymond's ordinariness or groundedness becomes an illogical part of the story. He is portrayed to be a villainous realism within the championing narrative of nihilism and absurdism. The realization of this antagonization of realism is what is missing from Perry's reading on the film (2022).

It can be inferred that the dominant appearances of culturally-laden violence here manifest symbolically rather than physically, in which physical forms of violence are signified simply to be aesthetic devices of the film. However, both forms of violence pivotally serve the overall theme of the film. The incessant depictions of violence, realistic and otherwise, are argued in this article to be a form of anti-violence rhetoric depicted in the film. This rhetoric is what Bhabha calls as "language of the violence of the poetic sign" (2004, p. 60), where aesthetic and cultural-political aspects are combined to tremble the dominant discourse (will be discussed more in the next section). This paradoxical trait (campaigning non-violence through representations of violence) does not come free-floatingly, but rather it has a Chinese philosophical ground in it.

As this article's lens, the philosophical ground is the conception of *wu wei* as in accordance to Taoist teaching. The initial and general correlation between the film and Taoism was made by Michie (2022), in which this article continues to narrow through the lens of *wu wei*. This concept is firstly stimulated by Laozi, an ancient Chinese philosopher whose ontological views were in contradictory to Mozi during the period of Warring States (475 BCE), in his seminal *Dao De Jing* (The Book of the Way). Without getting into deeper interpretation and complexity of the concept, here it is only emphasized how the concept of *wu wei* was originally conceived by Laozi as a paradigm to combat the idea of voluntarist excellence for anyone who joined the state (Qin State) to win wars as imposed by Mozi (Laozi & Roberts, 2001, p. 33). Laozi criticized the hyper-activeness of Qin's state that led to endless wars and violence, and thus

offered the concept of *wu wei* as doing actions through non-action. It is stated, “*Thus when circumstances require a man of learning and character to preside over the world below the sky his best course is minimal action (wu wei).*” (Laozi & Roberts, 2001, pp. 55–56). For Laozi, the hyper-activeness of Qin State is proven to be ineffective. This idea is similar to common criticism towards the causality of modernism towards world wars (see MacKay 2017, 9). However, *wu wei* does not mean total submissiveness towards reality, but rather being reflexive and calculated about it (Laozi & Roberts, 2001, p. 107). In short, it reflects that violence is not supposed to be the first action to enact in any circumstances.

Incorporating the concept of *wu wei* here means to integrate Waymond’s culminating act in the film into the discussion. As already mentioned earlier, the main version of Waymond is problematized due to his seemingly purity as well as his unwillingness to engage in both symbolic and physical violence. However, the climax of the second act (“Everywhere”) represents his characteristics as the ideal answer for the fabula’s conflicts. In the climax, Waymond states,

Can we, can we just stop fighting? I know you are all fighting because you are scared and confused. I’m confused too. All day! ... the only thing that we have to know is that we have to be kind. (timestamp 01:45:17 – 01:46:14)

It is also in this particular scene where Evelyn and Waymond in all multiverses reconcile through a series of montages.



Figure 5. The climax of “Everywhere” part

After these montages, Evelyn continues to “fight” in the same way as Waymond does. Although it should be noted that she still utilizes slight physical violence, but her intention here is different. If in the beginning and middle parts of the film the physical violence is meant in a classical way of abolishing the villain of the story (Propp, 1968, p. 53), this climactic part subverts the intention of the violence into bringing happiness towards the ones who are beaten. Evelyn utilizes her already-godly power into bringing what each individual deeply desires rather than simply destructing them.

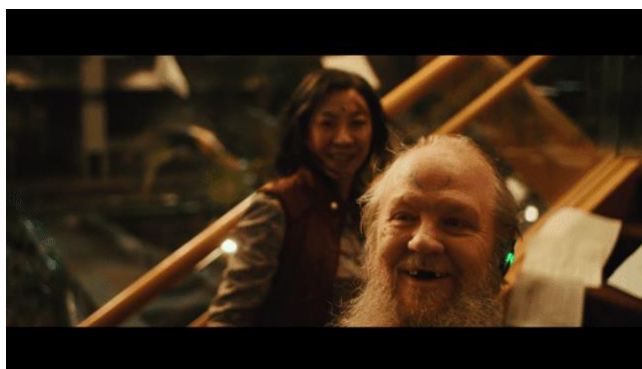


Figure 6. An example of Evelyn bringing happiness to the beaten



Figure 10. Evelyn and Joy reconcile in the end of the film

The subversion of violence qua violence into paradoxical violence as non-violence is allegorical to Laozi's *wu wei*. Through this cathartic climax, including the one where Evelyn fully embraces Joy in being who she really is, the film stances itself in construing such resolution as the "ideal" way of life. It playfully combines idiosyncratic violence with heavily cultural and allegorically philosophical substances to promote this very idea of *wu wei*. In short, it campaigns for non-action through such frenetic action sequences. This paradoxical dualism is synthesized cathartically into the highest point of the film's dialectical weight. The embracing of reality and producing such campaign is what Jameson terms as Utopia in cinema (2013, pp. 55–56), that is, an attempt to realistically portray subjects' condition in particular space (how diasporic-based violence are contemporarily happening) and at the same time present a philosophical wish for an ideal future (how diasporic-based violence should be viewed and resolved).

3.3. Contextualizing *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* in Contemporaneous Time: Transcending Diasporic Liminality

The textual analysis then should be brought into a contextual arena of the film, which in this article only focuses on two contexts, namely the subversion of violence in American cinematic representation towards Chinese diaspora and the film's allegorical quality towards the real life condition of Chinese diaspora in the contemporary United States. The first contextualization begins on the former one.

The paradoxical nature of violence-cum-non-violence (*wu wei*) in the film does not only serve as an aesthetic choice, but rather a combination of it with the film's socio-cultural aspects that serves as the challenge of the *doxa* of Chinese diasporic violence in American cinema. *Doxa* here is understood as "rules of the game" or ideological objectivity that goes unquestioned (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 159). The rooted connection between Chinese diaspora and violence follows the *doxa* of American cinema that is at stake here. It continues such tradition in order to translate the film into an Chinese-American film entity, much similarity to what Chan (2008) observes as one of the pivotal causes for the success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that utilizes Matrix-esque violence as an aesthetic element. However, different to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* whose thematic substance is still violence qua violence, *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* playfully criticizes such characterization of Chinese-American cinema through the advocacy *wu wei*. It aesthetically packages itself as another violent festivity. However, this article argues that these violence (symbolic and physical) only serve as a medium to critique Chinese-American stigmatized image and narrative in general. This reading is indeed an answer (as interpreted through the concept of *wu wei*) to the deeply culturally rooted problems in the film (as interpreted through Bhabha's postcolonial theory). Thus, continuing Huynh's notion of "the audiences are missing the point" (2022) in terms of the film's nihilistic depth, this article complements that what also has been missing to be viewed is the fact of this philosophically emancipatory paradox.

Secondly, the film's connection to the reality of Chinese diaspora in the United States is also apparent. The analyses of cultural clash and violence above do not only serve as an intertextual reach towards other similar cultural texts, but also to the reality where Chinese diaspora often experience such things (Hsin & Aptekar, 2022). The clashes that they feel grow exponentially due to COVID pandemic that results in continuous xenophobic treatment in the United States (Li, 2022; Tan et al., 2022; Yeh et al., 2022). The connection made between the film's substance towards reality is not explicitly articulated within the film itself, but its content is able to be allegorically interpreted in such a way through the realization of cognitive mapping as already mentioned in the methodological part (Jameson, 2013).

The liminality that is concerned here thus manifests not only in the contestation of native and diaspora, but also in the cycle-breaking of violence within Chinese-American narrative in American cinema. It is conclusively argued that the film attempts to transcend these two kinds of liminalities by coding Chinese-American aesthetic repertoire and creatively transcoding it in such idiosyncrasy in order to not only gaining success (financially and artistically speaking), but also philosophically subverting its repertoire. It also grounds its thematic substance in the relevance of diasporic liminality as the realistic and cultural parts of the film, and resolves the problem through the concept of *wu wei*, where non-action is represented as the ideal way to transcend the inevitable diasporic liminality.

4. Conclusion

This article has shown that amidst the abundance of multiversal hype of *Everything, Everywhere All at Once*, the film carries an important socio-cultural weight and produces a utopian message to resolve diasporic liminality. The film can be read as an allegory of the reality of Chinese-American diasporic life in the United States. It ably combines individual or directorial creativity to its contextual aspect, whilst at the same time implicitly imposing the philosophical concept of *wu wei* that serves as an idealism and a local representation of Chinese philosophy in general. It does not paint American culture or any other culture that is distinct from the main characters to be antagonistic, but rather as a pure difference that should naturally coexist without having to be forced to change. In other words, it evokes a way of life that accentuates action through non-action (*wu wei*). These cultural and philosophical insights are two out of many reasons that make the film a prominent voice in nowadays cultural products. However, this article acknowledges the neglect towards a deeper symbolism of the festivity of action sequences in the film, or in other words, the film's aesthetic part itself in order to shed a light on its cultural facet. It is then hoped that further research would be able to expand deeper on this matter.

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