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LOVE OR CONTROL? ANALYZING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION WITHIN EAST ASIAN FAMILY THROUGH ARTWORKS

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ABSTRACT

The author's own spirited and unconventional childhood defied societal norms, challenging conventional expectations for a young girl. In the name of love, their parents endeavored to guide them towards a more reserved and compliant path.

Drawing from these personal experiences, this research aims to unravel the intricate fabric of emotional expression within East Asian families and its profound impact on familial relationships and individual psychological well-being through the lens of artistic works. These themes of love and control frequently surface in the creations of East Asian artists, providing a unique perspective to deepen our understanding of the complex emotional dynamics within these families.

This paper embarks on a comprehensive analysis of selected East Asian artistic works, delving into how these pieces illuminate the dynamics of love and control. The objective is to offer a deeper insight into emotional expression in East Asian families, casting light on its significant influence on familial relationships and individual psychological well-being.

LOVE OR CONTROL? ANALYZING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION WITHIN EAST ASIAN FAMILY THROUGH ARTWORKS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, inspired by the popular animation *Turning Red*, a group of friends and I engaged in a profound discussion about our childhood experiences. What struck us was a commonality among our stories—a tendency among our parents to use control as a means of expressing love. In many East Asian households, we found that authentic emotional expression was often lacking. Reflecting on my own childhood, I vividly remember my vivacious and spirited nature. I often engaged in activities that defied conventional expectations for a young girl, such as covering drawers with ink, crawling under tables, and covered in mud. Rather than embracing my boundless energy, my parents, in the name of love, attempted to mold me into a more reserved and quieter child. They enrolled me in various extracurricular activities like piano lessons, calligraphy classes, and chess clubs, all of which failed to capture my genuine interest. I believed that their attempts to change me were an expression of love, and so I earnestly tried to reshape myself to fit their ideal image of a "proper" girl.

However, it was through my exposure to the world of illustration that I began to understand the power of art as a bridge for communication between parents and children. I realized that within the realm of meaningful artistic creations, both parents and children could grow together, learning how to communicate and express their needs and emotions. This was a far more constructive means of conveying love, rather than resorting to controlling methods.

I couldn't help but wonder how different my family's emotional landscape might have been if we had explored meaningful picture books or artworks together during my formative years. Perhaps our emotions would have flowed more smoothly. This curiosity is precisely why I find myself drawn to researching this topic.

In East Asian cultures, the family unit is regarded as the cornerstone of society, with emotional expression among family members often shaped by family structures, societal pressures, and cultural traditions. Within this social framework, individual emotions are often required to be controlled and suppressed to maintain familial and societal harmony. However, this does not imply a lack of love and emotion within East Asian families. On the contrary, familial relationships are deeply cherished, and parental care and concern are often expressed through silent acts of devotion. However, due to the lack of open communication, control is sometimes resorted to as a means of emotional expression.

Artistic creations have long served as a means of emotional expression, providing artists with a platform to explore and convey their emotions. They also offer audiences an opportunity to understand and experience these emotions through the artist's perspective. In East Asian artists' works, themes of love and control surface frequently, with artists using various forms of art to reflect and delve into this complex relationship. These works may include paintings, literature, films, and other art forms, providing a unique perspective for individuals to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity and intricacies of emotional expression within East Asian families.

In this paper, I will delve into a series of East Asian artistic works, analyzing the portrayal of love and control within these pieces. Through this in-depth exploration, I hope to gain a better understanding of the complexities of emotional expression within East Asian families and its impact on family relationships and individual psychological well-being.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

In East Asian culture, a family refers to a group that includes parents and children. Sometimes, it can also refer to a family consisting of a group of relatives and their dependents. Family members are usually born into, raised within, and even work for the family, forming strong emotional bonds. There are mutual rights and responsibilities among family members. The family is often described as the primary place where people learn about social responsibility and self-discipline, with parents as the initial teachers (King and Bond 1985; Lee 1991). Families are vital in society, serving as its cornerstone.

Family culture and society are closely intertwined, with each influencing the other. In East Asian cultures it is influenced by Confucianism, Mohism, and Taoism, and individual identity is often intertwined with collective identity. Every East Asian individual belongs to a collective group, sharing a sense of pride and also bearing the burden of collective shame. The expression of emotions in interpersonal relationships is guided by Confucian ethical and moral systems, which emphasize restraint in emotional expression (Hwang 2009; Ji et al. 2010). Public displays of emotion are often considered inappropriate, unlike in Western culture, where emotional restraint might be seen as social withdrawal or shyness; but in Eastern culture, it's considered polite or gentle.

Confucianism in East Asian culture tends to prioritize conformity to societal norms over individual needs, emotions, or desires. Deviating from these norms often leads to feelings of shame. This cultural framework remains prevalent in modern East Asia, characterized by collectivism (low individualism) and a hierarchical social orientation, which places a high value on harmony. However, these traditional values, which include emotional restraint, collectivism,

authoritarianism, and a hierarchical system, have led to a lack of emotional expression and a neglect of emotional needs within East Asian families (Lai and Tsai 2014). For example, Schwartz (1994) found that Hong Kong scored relatively high on conservatism, while Western countries such as Germany scored higher on autonomy when assessing cultural dimensions.

Figure 1 Confucius

Due to these traditional values in East Asian cultures, East Asian parents have high expectations for their children to possess excellent qualities in three areas: family-related traits, academic-related traits, and behavior-related traits (Chen 1986). Cultivating these traits is achieved by combining authoritarian parenting styles, which involve high control and strict behavioral standards, with a high level of involvement and concern for children. Parents are expected to express emotions towards their children, but only certain kinds. Specifically, they're more likely to exhibit critical, negative emotions than affirming, affectionate ones.

This tendency towards limited emotional expression shows up in romantic relationships as well. Existing research suggests that, in collectivist cultures, the need for intimacy in romantic partners is primarily fulfilled through interdependent family relationships rather than romantic

relationships (Tseng and Hsu 1970; Suen 1983). For instance, in individualistic backgrounds, there is an emphasis on direct, expressive communication styles, whereas collectivist backgrounds more commonly emphasize indirect, nonverbal, context-dependent, and less expressive communication styles, resulting in less openness and self-disclosure. Consistent with these explanations, some studies have found that East Asians tend to engage in less self-disclosure in intimate relationships, while individuals from Western cultures tend to be more open to sharing (Chia et al. 1994). In contrast, Western psychology considers emotional suppression to be unhealthy. This viewpoint, originally proposed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), has strongly influenced Western educational thinking, even today. Research conducted within a Western cultural context often associates emotional suppression with psychological issues and lower relationship satisfaction.

Due to these cultural differences and their influence on parenting, East Asian parents express love to their children differently than Western parents. This difference can be understood from a cognitive-behavioral perspective: parents may adjust how they express love to their children based on their cultural background. Under Western cultural influence, children may experience positive emotions and love, which can encourage better performance. In contrast, East Asian culture places more emphasis on maintaining a harmonious family atmosphere and avoiding conflicts through restrained emotional expression.

However, one of the family's functions is to provide protection and emotional support to its members. Family should fulfill psychological needs such as safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization (Leng and Salzman 2016). These needs collectively drive the family's functioning and align with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, which posits that the family's role is to satisfy individuals' basic desires. When these needs are not met, individual

desires can be suppressed, potentially leading to psychological disorders (Sirgy 1986). Effective emotional expression within the family is crucial for the psychological well-being of its members. However, in East Asian families influenced by outdated cultural norms, emotions are often expressed through suppression and control, resulting in a distorted family atmosphere, a theme depicted in many artistic works.

ANALYZING ARTISTIC WORKS

Analysis of Metaphors and Synopsis

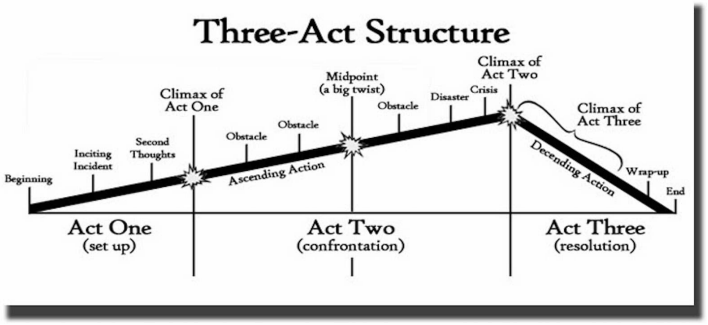

Figure 2 The three-act structure

The three-act structure is a commonly used model in narrative fiction, dividing the story into three distinct parts, often referred to as "set up," "confrontation," and "resolution." This structure was widely popularized in Syd Field's 1979 book, Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting. Throughout the film, metaphors are cleverly woven into the story, and I'll delve into their significance within the narrative.

Bao - A Pixar Animation

Bao, the winner of the 2018 Oscar for Best Animated Short Film, received widespread recognition for its emotional impact and storytelling. In *Bao*, the metaphors and plot development offer a profound insight into emotional expressions within East Asian families. The

use of food as a metaphor for love and connection, for instance, is a central theme that resonates deeply with audiences of diverse cultural backgrounds. Through animation and storytelling, *Bao* transcends language barriers to convey universal emotions and familial dynamics.

Figure 3 Poster, Bao, 2018

Act 1 Set Up – Mother and Son

"Bao" refers to a traditional Chinese food – a snack made by enveloping meat or vegetables within a dough casing. *Bao* has a runtime of about 8 minutes and centers around a Chinese mother. In the opening scene of this short film, she starts making dumplings from scratch, cooks them, and serves them to her husband and herself. After her husband finishes his meal and leaves the table, she places the last dumpling in her mouth, and suddenly it comes to life, growing a human-like body and face. The mother continues to care for this dumpling as if it were her own son. Over time, the dumpling, who grows up much like a real child, goes through typical teenage rebellion and grows distant from his overly protective mother.

In the film's initial segment, the mother's protectiveness of the dumpling is reminiscent of

an old Chinese saying, “Hold it in your hand for fear of dropping it and hold it in your mouth for fear of melting it.” In East Asian families, reliance on a symbiotic parent-child relationship is commonplace. Instead of seeing their child as an independent individual, East Asian parents often tightly bind their children with excessive protection and control. In the film, the mother's love (which manifests as confinement) is palpable as she frets about his safety, shields him from harm, and caters to his every need. While such a relationship is reasonable for children until adolescence, it can become challenging for mothers to break free from these loving habits when their children seek independence – even if it harms the child. The intense love and the child's yearning for independence create a powerful clash.

Act 2 Confrontation – Mother’s Dream

The once-adorable dumpling gradually grows up and is no longer as cute as he once was. He makes friends independently, becomes rebellious, and even has a Caucasian girlfriend. After visiting home to introduce his girlfriend to his parents, the boy starts packing his bags to leave. He's about to leave his childhood home, and it seems he won't stay by his mother's side like a little dumpling anymore. The mother can't accept it, and she stands in front of the door, resolutely preventing her son from leaving. However, when the son insists on leaving, the mother reveals her possessive side – she grabs the dumpling and literally devours her son. She almost immediately regrets it, as her act led to her son's demise. When she realizes this, she first freezes, then begins to cry endlessly in solitude. It's only when her real son returns home that she realizes was just a dream.

A dumpling is meant to be food, but the audience might be taken aback when the mother suddenly eats her own son, treating him as though he were a dumpling. How should we interpret this extreme duality of motherhood? Haya Katsumi writes in *Fairy Tale Psychology* that, at its

core, motherhood has a dual nature of nurturing and destroying, possessing both the positive force of nurturing life and the negative force of destroying all life. This tendency also exists deep within the human mother's psyche. The same function can be observed in matters related to life, as well as those related to death. In *Bao*, the director employs a somewhat eerie plot to illustrate this dual nature of motherhood. On one hand, the mother gives birth to her son and raises him day by day, year by year; on the other hand, she exhibits a horrifying side when her son wants to leave home in a hurry, devouring him out of desperation. This motherly relationship subtly conveys, “I love you immensely, but since you want to leave me, I'd rather consume you or destroy you so we can be together forever.” Parents who use control to shield their children from harm may inflict more unseen damage upon them.

Act 3 Resolution – Awake

At the end of the story, the real son returns home. He has a comically exaggerated dumpling face, just like the little dumpling in the dream. With his girlfriend by his side, they sit together at the family table.

Faced with a repetition of the same scene, it appears the mother no longer insists on keeping the young couple apart; rather, she tries to get along with them. They even make dumplings together. The dumplings made by the daughter-in-law turn out surprisingly well. This may signify that she has begun to accept that her son will have his own relationships and his own life. The dream has fulfilled its purpose and exits the stage, no longer needing to be replayed in the mother's dream. Essentially, the dumpling becomes a symbol representing the mother's complicated emotions towards her child.

***Turning Red* - A Disney Film**

Figure 4 Poster, Turning Red, 2022

Disney's animated film, *Turning Red*, offers a compelling portrayal of the intricate emotional dynamics and control issues within East Asian families, deeply rooted in their cultural influences. The story revolves around Mei, a 13-year-old girl growing up in a traditional Asian family. Her family runs a temple open to tourists, where they pay their respects to their ancestors. Mei's mother, Ming, a loving yet somewhat neurotic figure, often places Mei in the role of a dutiful daughter. But Mei, like any teenager, is spirited, active, and beginning to explore her interests in the opposite sex. A surprising incident forces Mei to undergo a transformation into a red panda during moments of intense stress, revealing a well-guarded family secret: the women in Mei's family possess the unique ability to turn into red pandas.

Act 1 Set Up – Transformation

In the initial part of the film, Mei embodies several traits commonly associated with Asian children; she excels academically, particularly in mathematics; displays musical talent, and amasses numerous awards and certificates. Concurrently, like her peers experiencing adolescence, she undergoes both physical and psychological changes. She maintains her circle of friends, idolizes a pop group, and grapples with her first crush. As Mei embarks on the transformative journey of embracing independence, expressing her individuality, and experiencing love during her adolescent years, she increasingly contends with the controlling influence of her similarly "typical" East Asian mother, Ming. The film vividly illustrates how Ming meticulously manages Mei's life, from entering her room without knocking to perusing her notes, and even growing excessively anxious if Mei is just ten minutes late returning home from school. In one striking scene, Ming even rushes to Mei's school after she forgets her sanitary pads. This vividly portrays the overprotective and controlling tendencies often observed in East Asian households, where parents find it challenging to accept their children's gradual transition into independent individuals.

The diverse responses to Mei's red panda transformation in the film reflect the suppressive nature of East Asian families. When Mei transforms into a red panda during moments of excitement, her friends and family react differently. Her schoolmates celebrate her as one of the most popular students, appreciating her endearing red panda form. However, at home, Mei's parents arrange an exorcism to seal the red panda within her. The red panda serves as a multi-layered metaphor, with the film's English title, *Turning Red*, clearly indicating the direction of transformation: red symbolizes not just the red-brown panda but also intense emotions, desires, rebellion, self-identity, ambition, maturity, and even the onset of menstruation and sexual fantasies. These elements represent fundamental aspects of adolescent growth, yet

within East Asian households, parents often respond with suppression and control when confronted with any deviation from the norm.

East Asian culture places substantial emphasis on an individual's appropriate role and behavior within the collective, and it tends to evaluate behavior according to external morals or social standards, rather than individual needs, emotions, or desires. Deviating from the prescribed behavior often results in shame for those who don't conform. Mei, much like many contemporary East Asian teenagers, receives a blend of traditional Confucian education and an increasing emphasis on individualism. In reality, her excellent grades and artistic talents are not incompatible with her interests in a boy band and the natural development of her romantic fantasies; these are all authentic human experiences. Unfortunately, her parents' high-pressure tactics initially led her to reject her true self.

Act 2 Confrontation – Rebellion

In the second part of the film, the conflict between Mei and her parents escalates, representing the intense clash of suppressed emotions and self-expression in East Asian families. Mei's parents strongly disapprove of her attending a boy band concert. To raise money for concert tickets, Mei and her friends capitalize on the popularity of the red panda to sell photos at school and earn income by participating in birthday parties. During a birthday party, Ming discovers her daughter's clandestine efforts to accumulate money for the concert, and she blames Mei's friends for their involvement. Faced with her mother's anger and disappointment, Mei finds it challenging to defend her friends. In this section, Mei and her parents find themselves with entirely opposing needs. Mei and her friends seemingly plan to attend the concert, but their actions are, in reality, a rebellion against the overprotective and controlling educational methods guided by East Asian culture. Ming typifies a standard East Asian parent: diligent and devoted to

her family, but continually burdened by a sense of duty and an unconscious desire to channel this anxiety into control over the next generation (Lu et al., 2000). As the film approaches its conclusion, the director subtly conveys to the audience that Ming, just like Mei, is also a victim of the suppression imposed by East Asian culture.

Act 3 Resolution – Self-awareness

In the film's climax, Mei decides to honor her commitment and attend the concert with her friends instead of going through the exorcism at home. Unable to contain her anger, Ming transforms into a giant red panda and disrupts the concert. With the help of others, Mei and Ming enter the spiritual realm created by the exorcism, where Mei witnesses her mother's adolescence, when she was a fragile and rebellious young girl, just like herself. In this moment, Mei confronts the ultimate choice: whether to relinquish the red panda or embrace her unique, unconventional, yet genuine self. The director visualizes this decision as Mei, struggling to crawl into a mirror, sees the red panda gradually detaching from her. She looks back, locking eyes with the red panda in the mirror, their bodies tightly connected. In the end, Mei and Ming both accepted their own Red Panda sides and learned to live in harmony with this aspect of themselves.

This form of self-awareness is described by philosopher Michel Foucault: “The self is not so much what people are, as it is what they make of themselves.” Just as the red panda resides within Mei from the beginning to the end, it is a part of Mei rather than a negative force. What is often overlooked is that, in the first half of the story, Mei's mother, Ming, maybe the so-called “opponent that individuals must resist,” but, in her own storyline, Ming also has a self and has experienced the moment when she locked eyes with her own red panda in the mirror; her red panda is even larger than her daughter's. Ming becomes the one in crisis, and she needs her daughter's rescue. The entire story not only revolves around Mei's generation but also delves into

her mother's childhood, revealing that these struggles and fears can be traced through the family tree for several generations. This also demonstrates that parents and children in East Asian families are not inherently at odds with each other (Matsumoto 1999), but, as times change and demands shift along with the individual's growth, some traditional parenting methods are no longer suitable for today's East Asian families.

Illuminating Contrasts in Family Narratives

Bao and *Turning Red*, both directed by Domee Shi, share a distinct approach in which they use artwork to transform real-life issues into fantastical narratives, employing gentler and more whimsical storytelling to depict the unique dynamics within East Asian families.

Bao can be viewed as a condensed version of *Turning Red*. These two works have several commonalities: they both focus on East Asian parent-child relationships, featuring a mother with strong controlling tendencies and a less prominent father. They employ anthropomorphism—the former involves a transformation into a bun, while the latter features a transformation into a red panda—and consistently incorporates Chinese cultural elements. Additionally, both narratives explore cross-cultural interactions, the former showcasing the son's relationship with a foreign woman, and the latter involving the daughter forming friendships with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. These narratives revolve around intense conflicts that ultimately lead to heartwarming reconciliations.

Compared to *Turning Red*, *Bao* offers a more chilling portrayal of maternal control. When the son transforms into a bun, his autonomy and agency are abruptly stripped away, and the mother's uncontrollable desire for control leads to an unsettling act of consumption. This particular scene within the 8-minute short film carries far more impact than the entirety of *Turning Red*, which spans two hours. Even the spectacle of the little panda causing destruction in

a sports arena pales in comparison to the harrowing moment of maternal consumption.

Figure 5 Domee Shi with Turning Red characters

While both *Turning Red* and *Bao* ultimately lead to reconciliation, the heart of both stories lies in the conflicts within families and the inner struggles of the characters. These themes are of particular interest to Domee Shi, the Chinese Canadian creator. Before reaching their resolutions, these conflicts are portrayed with a wealth of familiar, relatable details, such as hobbies viewed as dangerous or inappropriate, abrupt restrictions on attending concerts, and interference by parents in friendships and romantic relationships.

In the context of Western psychology, suppressing emotions can lead to emotional neglect and may potentially trigger a range of mental health issues (Schmitt and Allik 2005). Similarly, in East Asian families, parents often use control and suppression to express care for their children. These behaviors are frequently depicted in both Western and Eastern literary and artistic works as a kind of "evil force," yet few people have delved into the causes of these behaviors and the cultural influences behind them.

In fact, within an East Asian context, even when immigrants relocate overseas, far from their homelands, the family unit remains an unshakable foundation. Family values, principles,

and intergenerational relationships are passed down through the generations. What sets *Turning Red* and *Bao* apart is the decision not to create a stereotypical representation of the modern, "correct" West. As articulated by Edward Said in his concept of Orientalism, the East is often imagined as a shadow, constructed as something heterogeneous, fragmented, and "othered," existing in opposition to the West.

In the case of *Turning Red* and *Bao*, the conflicts undeniably reflect certain characteristics of East Asian families, but they manage to find a universal balance before falling into stereotypes. Most importantly, these conflicts are internalized: Mei ultimately forges her path without the guidance of any mentor representing the West. What we witness in her character is not a tearing apart of values between the individual and the family or the self and society, but a coexistence.

Through analyzing the artworks of East Asian artists and the cultural history of East Asia, it is not difficult to see that the behavior of parents in East Asian families, who prefer to use control to express their care for their children, is more a result of a lack of communication and understanding. As society progresses and basic human needs are gradually met, parenting should also pay more attention to nurturing children's mental well-being. It is believed that soon, through learning and communication, the suppressed emotions in East Asian families can gradually be released.

VISUAL THESIS

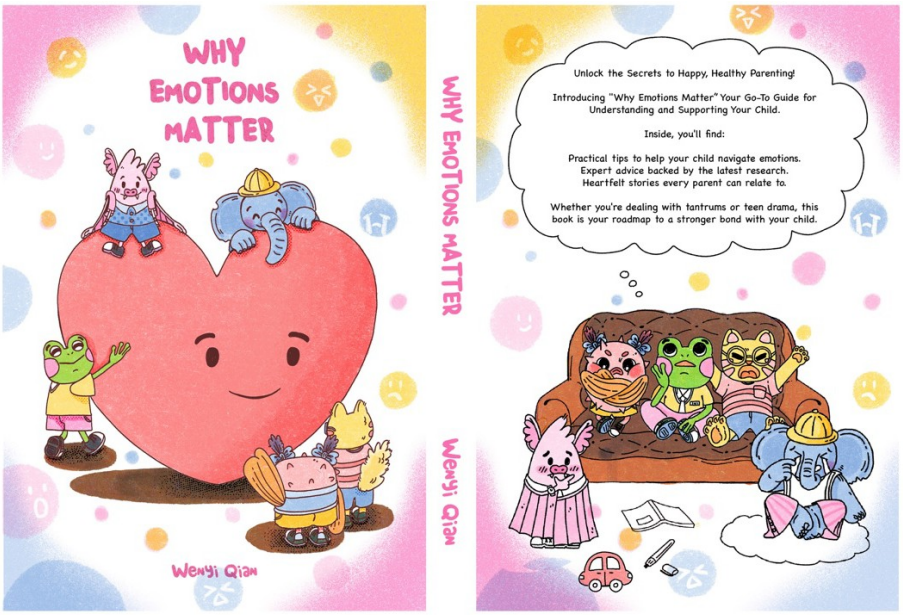

Figure 6 Why Emotions Matter Cover and Back

Based on the research above, I created a guidebook about how to deal with children's emotions to help East Asian parents understand their children's emotions and learn some strategies to deal with these emotions. Along with the guidebook, I also created a coloring book for children to play with.

Artist Statement

In my visual thesis project, "Why Emotions Matter," I delve into the intricate dynamics of East Asian families, exploring the nuanced ways in which to respond to children's emotions within these cultural contexts. Love, a universally cherished emotion, manifests uniquely across different cultures, and my project seeks to illuminate the particularities of its expression within East Asian familial relationships.

At the heart of my project lies a commitment to showcasing the positive and nurturing ways in which parents can respond to their children's emotions. Through the emphasis on

empathy, understanding, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence, I strive to empower parents to create nurturing environments where love flourishes and familial bonds deepen. Through " Why Emotions Matter," I endeavor to contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of East Asian familial dynamics while promoting love, empathy, and emotional well-being within these cherished relationships.

Content of Why Emotions Matter

This book consists of four chapters: “Unveiling the Depth of Emotions,” “Common Negative Emotions in Children,” “Common Parenting Misconceptions and Effects,” and “Practical Emotional Management Strategies for Parents.”

The first chapter primarily introduces the importance of emotions for children, emphasizing that emotions are often suppressed in East Asian families due to cultural influences, as highlighted in my research.

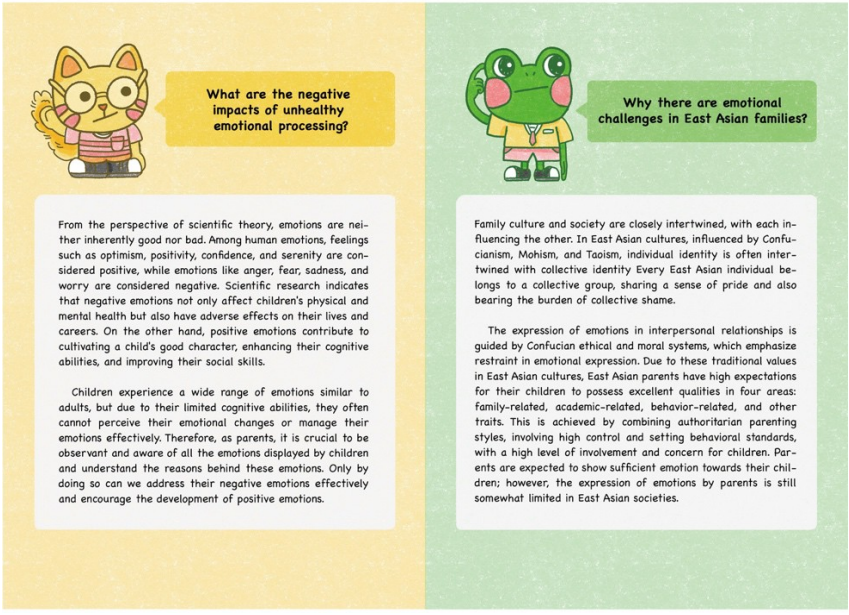

Figure 7 Why Emotions Matter, Chapter 1

The second chapter delves into the reasons behind children's experiences of emotions

such as anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Each emotion is accompanied by an animal character, and on their corresponding pages, I explain why I selected these animals to represent specific emotions.

Figure 8 Why Emotions Matter, Chapter 2

In the third chapter, I address five misconceptions that parents may have when dealing with their children's emotions. Each misconception is illustrated with a scenario and accompanied by explanations of potential consequences and preventive measures.

Figure 9 Why Emotions Matter, Chapter 3

The final chapter presents five strategies for parents to incorporate into their daily lives. Each strategy is illustrated with two everyday scenarios to demonstrate its application. Following the illustrations, dedicated information pages offer guidance for parents on implementing each strategy effectively.

Figure 10 Why Emotions Matter, Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

In my written thesis looking into the depths of familial love and cultural tradition, East Asian families navigate a complex web of emotions, control, and the age-old yearning for understanding. The profound impact of control as a means of expressing love is a deeply rooted theme within these families, often shaped by the compelling influence of collectivism, emotional restraint, and hierarchical values.

Through a captivating journey guided by the lens of artistic works, we have delved into the hearts of East Asian families, seeking to understand the intricacies of their emotional landscape. From the enchanting world of Pixar's *Bao* to the vibrant narrative of Disney's *Turning Red*, we have explored how these artworks offer a unique perspective on the dynamics of love and control within East Asian households. These surveys provided inspiration and theoretical support for my visual thesis, expanding on the findings of my written thesis. This emotional manual, targeted at East Asian families, further broadens the public's understanding of emotional management within the family context. Presented in a visual format, it makes my research accessible to children and parents, allowing for greater understanding and participation in the concept of emotions.

Overall, this research has deepened my understanding of emotional dynamics within East Asian families. Presenting my findings in the form of a manual not only educates but also entertains, providing viewers with a better understanding through both informative and visually engaging experiences. Throughout this process, I have gained a deeper insight into emotions, and this project has also helped me understand my relationship with my parents during childhood, furthering my personal growth.

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