

"Adulthood" for Education

"Adulthood" is an intimate, complex portrait of the Asian-American experience through the eyes of a young Chinese-American woman, who struggles to find an understanding with her family when she returns home to live with her immigrant mother who had previously disowned her. The layered and insightful, sociocultural issues raised in "Adulthood"-- including identity politics, depression, economic anxiety, and media-influenced, social voyeurism-- make the film a strong candidate for academic study, and creates a cinematic forum for discussion that is provocative and timely.

"Adulthood" originally premiered at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival, and later garnered international attention, winning a Best Actress award at the 2013 Monaco Film Festival for Jeanne Sakata. Sakata's portrayal of a brutal, yet caring and endearingly, unequivocal character, humanized, counters the stereotypical "Tiger mom". Living in Cinema and the University of Southern California's Asian Pacific Arts included "Adulthood" in their year-end top ten lists, among titles such as "Jane Eyre", "Fast Five", "My Week with Marilyn", "Melancholia", "The Flowers of War", and "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close".

While filmmaker Vicky Shen tells an Asian-American story, she skillfully does so in a way that finds common ground with society at large by dismantling the notion of people of color as "the other" in American society. "Adulthood" is a work that reinterprets the sometimes didactic topics of ethnic cinema with an original perspective, as the film is injected with "honesty and raw emotion not often seen in Asian-American narratives" (Donald Young, Director of Programs/ Center for Asian American Media). Though "Adulthood" is not a documentary, it may have a more far-reaching impact as an educational tool by luring viewers into watching the narrative and then drawing the audience into discussion-provoking issues of identity politics within the Asian-American community.

"Adulthood" has many layers that will engage students of all ages. "Each argument is written and acted out in a fashion to where immediate judgment is difficult to render. The character flaws are evenly distributed enough for one to develop their own personal connection and relation to the situation. Not only does 'Adulthood' refrain from summing up the Asian-American experience, the story leads to a gripping dynamic, and shifts gears to an emotional hyperdrive" (Cleveland Film Festival). "'Adulthood' packs so many compelling issues, ideas, and themes into the story, it feels impossible to sum up neatly" (Tonight at the Movies), and this is why it is a must-see for the classroom curriculum. It is also recommended for the DVD collections of public libraries.

The areas of study relevant to the topics of this film include:

- **Asian-American Studies**
- **Independent Film Studies**
- **Gender/Women Studies**
- **Cultural Anthropology**
- **Chinese Studies**
- **Counseling and Therapy**

"Adulthood" has been called a useful and inspiring educational tool as:

- 1) A depiction of the psychological landscape of an Asian-American family.
- 2) A cross-cultural story that shows the Confucian family at risk as traditionalism faces modernity.
- 3) A valuable tool to incite dialogue about depression among young Asian-American women who have the highest suicide rate for women between the ages of 15-24.
- 4) A work that challenges the "Tiger mom" controversy.
- 5) A springboard for discussion about today's media-influenced generation, coming-of-age in a time so heavily influenced by social media and social voyeurism.
- 6) A cinematic forum for discussion on how economics and culture affect one another.

(to see more about these topics, see below...)

Thematic Issues Explored in ADULTHOOD

1. The Psychological Landscape of an Asian-American Family

The story of "Adulthood" begins with a young Chinese-American artist, Lea May, suffering from post-college career ennui, who is boomeranged back home to live with her parents. The film goes on to explore the culturally-specific relationship between an immigrant mother and her American-born daughter, but manages to explore assimilation and their culture gap without any of the usual ethnic clichés.

The protagonist's inner-conflict in "Adulthood" is not simply a result of the culture clash between Lea's traditional Chinese parents and herself, but stems from the disjuncture between her upbringing and those of her non-Asian peers in mainstream American society. Thus, the cause of disconnection comes from the dichotomy of Asian-Americans' sociocultural context and inability of finding people who can relate to their specific cultural history and multiple identities. "Adulthood" also underscores how traditional Asian parents don't choose to raise their children in direct conflict to their children's peers, but parent the way they feel intuitively works from their cultural perspective.

"Adulthood" is without sentimentality and delves instead into emotionality as an honest result of the narrative's universal themes of family disconnection and alienation. From this, stems the story's main psychological dilemma: how one is to let go of the past when family is forever? The final scene between mother and daughter reveals that underneath their deeply felt

differences lies a reservoir of mutual love and metaphysical understanding that reaches beyond cultural misunderstandings and even fundamental differences. Family members live in this impossible place with each other but have to find a way to coexist. "Adulthood" explores these unspoken issues which are often too difficult for family members to communicate.

2. Traditionalism Facing Modernity: The Confucian Family at Risk

"Adulthood" portrays a family from multiple points-of-views. Many immigrant parents have sacrificed personal desires to secure their children's future, yet cultural differences can result in their American-born children being virtually strangers to them. Another side of this dilemma is presented: how do first-generation Americans reconcile fulfilling parental expectations and going after their own dreams?

"Adulthood" reveals how both children and parents' perspectives collide, but both are justified in their world views. This humanizes the immigrant experience, showing the commonality in struggles of all people. The film closes with the evolving face of a family, rather than a traditional, narrative ending-- raising questions on what place Asian-Americans have in the home and in society, as the state of the Asian-American voice is changing.

3. Depression Among Young Asian-American Women

Because "Adulthood" is a coming-of-age film from a female perspective, it has the ability to connect to young Asian-American women who experience similar struggles. "Adulthood" explores not only whether there can be a reconciliation between fundamental cultural differences but also explores issues of identity crisis among Asian-Americans and how it correlates to depression.

While Asian-Americans are stereotyped with the term "model minority," Asian-American and Pacific Islander women between the ages of 15-24 have the highest suicide rate of women in any race or ethnic group in that age group. "Adulthood" explores issues of depression by probing the raw, emotional impact and inner-conflict minorities face when they find themselves breaking stereotypes and going against the grain, not just in society but in the home. By incorporating race and cultural issues along with gender concerns, a transcendent feminist consciousness that goes beyond these boundaries may develop.

Asian-American women have to come to terms with their multiple identities and define feminist issues from multiple dimensions. In many traditional Asian-American households, females are expected to succeed in all areas: excelling as a student, working at a steady job, acting as a family role model, and playing nurturing roles. Quality of life factor is not emphasized. This pressure of putting personal dreams on hold weighs heavily on the young female protagonist in "Adulthood." Lea is criticized for not fulfilling her familial duties, resulting in the

breakdown of a family dynamic that depends on certain social constructs.

The impact of ethnic minority women's sociocultural context on help-seeking behavior is another subject that deserves attention. Without their family to turn to because of the stigma of mental health issues, young Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders find it difficult to discern just how serious depression is, how to identify it, and how to seek support. In addition, while depression is highly treatable, the pressures Asian-American women sometimes feel complicate their ability to get help and only 27 percent seek help and/or treatment. "Adulthood's" personal narrative aptly resonates with this demographic, asking the Asian-American community to think about depression differently and help identify the symptoms. "Adulthood" could serve as a valuable tool to incite dialogue about depression, which is rarely linked to cultural conflict; and to explore options for education, prevention and treatment within the community.

"Adulthood" suggests that personal happiness or livelihood is not dependent on financial security and academic achievement alone. Those who experience depression would feel less isolated in their struggles if the Asian-American community continues to openly communicate this issue through as many venues and forms of expression as possible. (Although "therapy" scenes are now cut from the film to make the film work cohesively, they are included in the DVD as a bonus feature for further discussion.)

4. Challenging the "Tiger Mom" Controversy

A hot topic in recent American popular culture is the controversy of the "Tiger Mom" debate, which questions the merit of a strict Asian parenting style often producing children who excel academically and, later, professionally. Critics argue that "Tiger parenting" deprives the new generation of their childhood and their freedom to express individuality. Proponents contend that "Tiger Mom discipline" is just what "troubled," American kids need.

"Adulthood" problematizes the "Tiger Mom" debate and raises the question of why the media has spotlighted this parenting style. Possible reasons for the Tiger mom debate could include China's growing economy, yellow peril, xenophobia, America's teen pregnancy and drug use problems, and so on. Could the backlash against "Tiger Mom" parenting even include a more discriminatory agenda, justifying the trend of college admissions disfavoring Asian-Americans? Furthermore, is the "Tiger Mom" paradigm too simplistic? For instance, could the culture of families make a difference in how kids will perceive their parents' motivational style?

"Adulthood" humanizes the "Tiger Mom" persona. The main character, Lea May, is a Chinese-American who clearly has artistic pursuits in the face of her mother's traditional values. Lea's mother isn't so much keeping her daughter from her dreams because of an attachment to cultural conservatism or even for the practicalities of financial security, but because of her inability to steer her daughter in navigating uncharted waters. Ultimately, Mrs. May

wants her daughter to be without the hardships and obstacles of not only living life as an artist but as an Asian-American artist. Her inability to communicate, often using literal and matter-of-fact analogies to impart life lessons, get in the way of optimizing her parental impact in a positive way. One hopes that maybe Lea will come around and understand where she is coming from, and that there isn't a need to push so hard. The road to Lea's growth and self-acceptance is finding humanity in her mother, and, therefore, growing to accept her. By the end of "Adulthood," we understand not just the daughter, who has artistic dreams, but the mother's desire for her daughter's happiness, as well as a deeply buried need for gratitude for her relentless efforts. The film offers a dual perspective of a mother-daughter relationship by creating a complex and meaningful portrayal of an immigrant mother as well.

L.A. Ovation Award winning actress, Jeanne Sakata, gives a psychologically astute portrayal of an immigrant mother, struggling to be the best parent she knows how to be in her circumstance. This makes the role of Mrs. May very real and Lea's difficulties with her relatable. An international audience has been able to identify with the mother's internal battle on a personal level, rather than unifying all the diverse individuals of one ethnic group and labeling this individual, "Tiger Mom." "Adulthood" reveals that within an ethnic culture, there is also a diverse voice. The audience is left with the question whether the "Tiger Mom" phenomenon is reminiscent of the "model-minority" paradigm, constructed to reinforce stereotypes rather than see individuality or the bigger context. "Adulthood" stimulates discussion about the objectifying terms minorities are given, what role the definitions of such terms play, and how mainstream views function as a whole with all minority groups in American society.

5. Social Media Creates a Hybrid Form of Identity Crisis

Filmmaker Vicky Shen furthers the themes of identity crisis in "Adulthood" by revealing how today's mass-media voyeurism can further create a sense of dissonance within the individual. Identity crisis is more universal than being limited to people who experience lives of split heritage or minorities isolated within the larger framework of American society. Media and popular culture have played a role in identity crisis, but the weight of it can feel even more hyperreal because of the advent of reality television, new media, and other influences that send messages that one should exploit oneself to obtain false ideas of self-worth and validation.

Underrepresented individuals in popular culture today may experience the influence of social media more intensely because it serves as a means to connect to society at large, to have a voice, and to feel less marginalized. A visceral, stylistic approach is woven throughout the film's narrative to portray the synthetic world in which Lea May observes outside of herself through a fictitious camera lens, like she is seeing herself in a movie.

Lea is so affected by idealized fulfillment, a modern-day "Madame Bovary," the barrier between

reality and fantasy blends. For example, Lea plays out conquering her fears of pursuing artistic endeavors by acting them out in the male-dominated, territorial world of surfing, rather than facing her real life obstacles.

Lea deals with the inner-conflict of searching for truth and, at the same time, being afraid of it with her real-life camera, as a way of communicating with herself and finding value among her financially successful family. The camera takes on the personification of various roles and mutates between a sidekick, reflection, nemesis, and mentor, paralleling her growing self-awareness. Though Lea feels unaccepted by her parents and thus unequipped for the real world, fear and blame cause the real paralysis in both her social and career growth. Lea eventually has to face certain truths that her camera reveals, in order to break through her misplaced blame. The camera lens voyeuristically and awkwardly reveals the self-consciousness Asian-Americans often feel when they seek an identity outside of the norm.

It becomes more important as the narrative progresses as to why Lea films and not what she films. Through the real camera lens, Lea not only finds validation but reveals how technology can be used as a great educator and source of energy. This thematic narrative sparks discussion over the productive and destructive sides of people relating through mass media, what the affect media has when it brings us stimuli at microwavable speeds, and if a kind of shared, simulated memory is implanted in the public's experience.

6. Cultural Economics- How Economics and Culture Affect One Another

"Adulthood" is a term coined to describe a new stage of life, between that of adolescence and adulthood. Many young adults have been facing financial difficulties because of rising college costs, consumerism, careers of lower security, and an ongoing need for new training and education. As a response, parents of today's youth seem increasingly willing to extend financial support and even an invitation for their adult children to live back at home. "Adulthood" asks its audience to consider more than the financial ramifications of post-graduates falling back on their parents for help. The film reveals that the tricky stages of childhood may have a lasting emotional impact, leaving adult-children without the tools to grow into maturity in their parents' home. "Adulthood" asks whether the support adult-children receive from their parents has potential to be more crippling than helpful. Overcoming personal stagnation becomes more about searching for peace by finding an identity beyond the heaviness of parental expectations.

Finally, "Adulthood" stimulates discussion about why economic status alone does not necessarily result in stability, leadership, empowerment, and community, nor does it allow for certain freedoms and inclusion. This reverberates as well into dialogue about how the relationship between business and culture affects our livelihood, relationships, family, and society. The thematic narrative of "Adulthood" is concerned with our consciousness with

respect to the connection between individual and family, as well as between individual and society, and not distancing us from those around us.

*To set up a post-screening Q&A with Writer/Director Vicky Shen, please contact...
adl_themovie@yahoo.com.