

NAVIGATING DISTANCE: SIGNS IN SONS, MOTHER-IN-LAW AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW RELATIONSHIPS IN *LAHN MAH*

Ika Angela

Received November. 02, 2024; Revised December. 08, 2024; Accepted December. 17, 2024.

Abstract: In Chinese-Asian culture, sons are often viewed as symbols of luck and hope, which leads parents to invest heavily in their futures. However, when a son is married, this deep connection can lead to tension, especially between his mother and wife. The son then finds himself in the tricky position of balancing both relationships between the Mother-in-Law (MIL) and the Daughter-in-Law (DIL). *Lahn Mah* (Pat Boonitipat, 2024) known in English as *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*, captures this dynamic with several scenes exploring the relationships among son, MIL, and DIL. Therefore, this study examines visual signs that convey the distance in the relationships between sons, MIL, and DIL in *Lahn Mah*. This research employs a descriptive qualitative methodology with Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis approach. The findings reveal nine key scenes illustrating varying distances between the son, MIL, and DIL. These distances shift as the story unfolds: wide gaps signify conflict, while closeness indicates reconciliation.

Keywords: distance; sons; in-laws; film; semiotic

Introduction

Family plays a vital role in Chinese-Asian culture, where sons are highly valued within the household. Sons are often considered a symbol of good luck for a family because they can continue the family's lineage. Therefore, sons usually get special treatment from their parents. Chinese parents even save a lot to buy a house for their son (Wang et al., 2021). However, on the other hand, as the hope of the family, sons often bear various expectations and responsibilities. Not only to continue the lineage but sons traditionally have to support their parents when they are old (Chee, 2021). Therefore, parents, especially mothers, may invest more emotionally and materially in sons.

However, when a son gets married and builds a household with his wife, various challenges can arise because of this "investment." Conflicts often occur between the son, mother-in-law (MIL), and daughter-in-law (DIL), leading to complex relationships. According to Woolley & Greif (2019), the relationship between a son, MIL, and DIL can be described as a triangular relationship, where closeness or distance between parties can affect the relationship between the two parties (dyadic). For instance, if the DIL and MIL's relationship is strained, it can impact the satisfaction of the DIL and son's marriage. The son often becomes the linchpin in the relationship between the two women. A linchpin is someone or something that connects or binds two other parties

(Woolley & Greif, 2019).

The role of the son as a linchpin is crucial. The family relationship will be more harmonious if the son can mediate in the MIL and DIL relationship. However, if the son is unsuccessful, conflicts will often occur and worsen the long-term relationship (Soeda & Araki, 1999). Therefore, the son's role is crucial in balancing the distance of the MIL-DIL relationship.

One of the films that interestingly depicts the distance between the son, MIL, and DIL relationship is *Lahn Mah* (in English, titled *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*). This film is directed by Thai filmmaker, Pat Boonitipat, which was released in 2024 and managed to attract 3,039,605 Indonesian viewers in 22 days of screening (CNN Indonesia, 2024). *Lahn Mah* tells the story of a man named M who tries to earn money by being devoted to his grandmother (Boonitipat, 2024). This film is rich in Chinese-Asian cultural elements, with several scenes portraying the relationship dynamics between Kiang, a son; Amah, his mother (MIL) and Pinn, his wife (DIL).

Several studies have explored the relationships between a son, MIL, and DIL. However, few have examined how the emotional distance in these relationships is shown visually in film. This study aims to address that gap and answer how visual signs convey the distance in the relationships between a son, MIL, and DIL in the movie *Lahn Mah*. Hopefully, this research will provide valuable insights into film studies, especially in examining this unique triangular relationship visually portrayed in film within Chinese-Asian culture.

Methodology

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative with Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis approach.

According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative methods use various data sources which are then analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. Therefore, the data collection technique in this study is watching *Lahn Mah* film, watching video interviews with the filmmakers, and reviewing other relevant literature.

The analysis focuses on scenes that relate to the interactions between Kiang, Amah, and Pinn. These scenes will be analyzed using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics theory. Saussure argues that a sign is formed by a signifier and a signified.

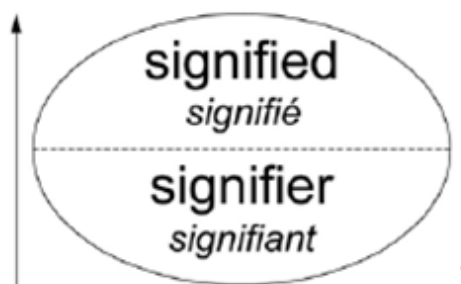


Figure 1. Saussure's sign dyadic model
(Source: Chandler, 2017)

The signifier can be an image, sound, words, and so on, while the signified is the meaning of the signifier. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, so the meaning is not attached to the sign and is determined by sociocultural conventions (Chandler, 2017).

Result

The film scenes selected for analysis are 9 scenes related to Kiang, Amah, and Pinn. The analysis of the scenes is as follows:

1. Qingming Festival (opening scene)



Figure 2. Qingming Opening Scene
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: Amah's family members were gathered for the Qing Ming event, except for Pinn and Rainbow, who spoke with Kiang. When Amah approached, Kiang showed her the phone so that Pinn and Rainbow could greet Amah. Then Amah reprimanded the two who had never attended the Qingming festival.

Signified: Son acts as a bridge to fill the distance between MIL and DIL by making them greet each other. However, this effort was not welcomed by MIL, who was already annoyed with DIL. The DIL was considered disrespectful to her husband's family ancestors because she had never attended the Qingming festival, which is passed down through generations in Chinese culture as an important expression of filial piety. This scene, consequently, shows the strained relationship between the DIL, MIL, and the son's family. This scene uses a position where DIL is between the son and MIL. DIL's presence (even though not physically present) feels like a barrier between the son and MIL's relationship because the son prioritizes contacting DIL. He also defends her so MIL cannot reprimand DIL.

2. Visit Amah's house on Sunday



Figure 3. Visit Amah's house on Sunday
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: All family members gather at the dining table. Pinn brings chicken from the hotel for Amah. Amah does not respond to Pinn's explanation. Then, Amah invites her children to play cards, but Kiang cannot join because he has to take Rainbow to her class. Chew reprimands Kiang to make time, but Kiang ignores her and asks about Amah's condition. Amah tells them that she already knows about her illness. Then, Kiang and his siblings are shocked and argue.

Signified: This scene shows that DIL's position in the son's family is low and cornered. DIL does not talk much,

turns her face away when there is an internal family discussion topic, and focuses more on caring for her child. At the same time, Sons acts as the head of the family by prioritizing the comfort of his child and his wife. This scene uses many blockings from actors to illustrate that there is always a distance between MIL and DIL. Often, Son prefers DIL over MIL. It can be seen when Son moves away to DIL's side when MIL approaches. This dynamic is highlighted during the family meal at the dining table, where shared dining underscores the distance and tension in their relationships. Group dining, featuring shared food and a small bowl of rice for each person, is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, which believes in maintaining interpersonal relationships (Choi et al., 2020).

3. Amah comes to Kiang's house



Figure 4. Amah comes to Kiang's House (Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: Kiang finally invited Amah over, upon her arrival, Rainbow and Pinn welcomed her warmly. Pinn showed her around, pointing out things they'd set up to make her comfortable. But Amah still seemed reluctant to move to Kiang's house. Kiang kept encouraging her, even though M sided with Amah and argued against it. After some hesitation, Amah finally accepted, feeling reassured by Kiang's support.

Signified: This scene shows that the strained relationship between DIL and MIL also occurs in DIL's house. When welcoming MIL, DIL does not approach the door and stands behind the wall. When MIL entered the room, DIL was still standing far from MIL. DIL tries to convince MIL, but MIL does not respond positively. In contrast, when the son attempts to convince her, she reacts more positively. When there is a family argument, DIL joins in, even if only a little. DIL shows more of her dislike through body gestures and facial expressions. Son, who initially argued, becomes the mediator in this situation. He manages to calm MIL and DIL down. This could happen because there are gender expectations in Chinese culture, where sons are responsible for taking care of their elderly parents (Lien et al., 2021). As a result, the MIL naturally finds reassurance in her son's words.

4. Go to Temple by train



Figure 5. Go to the Temple (Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: Kiang and Pinn invite Amah to the Temple. They sit across from Amah and M. Then Kiang asks Rainbow to sit beside Amah. Amah is happy with Rainbow's presence and talks to her. Pinn explains that this Temple accepts coffin donations and can improve health conditions. Amah just smiles. Then Kiang invites Amah to reminisce, and Amah answers happily.

Signified: This scene shows that MIL and DIL still have a distance in public. While DIL and Son sit side by side, MIL sits across them. DIL explains that this Temple can grant prayers, but MIL only responds with a smile. It is different when MIL responds to her grandchild and son by giving several questions or answers in return as a form of excitement.

5. Family's activities at the Temple

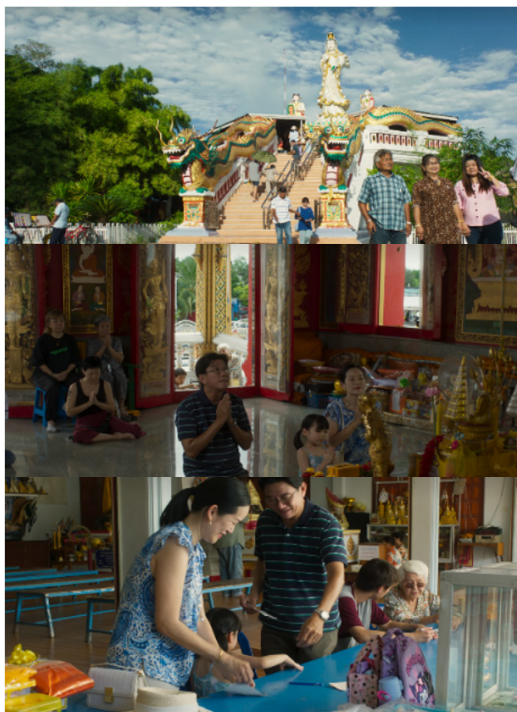


Figure 6. Family's Activities at the Temple
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: Pinn, Kiang, and Rainbow went up to the Temple first to pray while Amah was still counting the stairs with M. When Amah reached the top, she shared with M how she once gave Kiang her sandals as a child on a hot day. Then, they each wrote down wishes. Kiang wished for Pinn and Rainbow's happiness, while they wished for themselves. Meanwhile, Amah still wished for her children and M's success, leaving out Pinn and Rainbow.

Signified: This scene shows that the distance between MIL, DIL, and son is still felt. While DIL and Son are inside the temple, MIL looks at them from the outside. There are dividing wall that separates them. When they wrote their wishes, DIL sat far from MIL, while the son sat between them. While writing the wish, MIL does not consider DIL part of her family. Meanwhile, DIL also does not care about MIL's recovery wish. Also, the son only wishes for the happiness of his wife and child over his mother's recovery.

6. Back to Home by train



Figure 7. Train to home
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: In this scene, they return home. Rainbow is already sleeping on Pinn's thigh. Then Kiang approaches Amah and asks her to pack her things before moving to his house. Amah nods in agreement.

Signified: This scene shows that the distance between Son, DIL, and MIL is

increasing. They sit opposite each other, separated by a single row. The atmosphere feels gloomy and dark after MIL knows that Son and DIL do not consider her important.

7. Fight over inheritance in Hospital



Figure 8. Fight over inheritance in hospital
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: Kiang asked Chew where Amah's house certificate was. Chew was angry because Kiang brought it up while Amah was still around. Chew said, "Your wife put you up to this, didn't she?". Hearing this, Kiang sighed and said, "See? That is why I do not want to be a part of this family. Why do you guys treat Pinn as if she is not a member of our family?". Chew was speechless hearing this and told Kiang where the certificate was.

Signified: In this scene, the MIL and DIL are not present, but it reveals the reason why the son distances himself from the family. This scene shows that Son's family often misunderstands DIL. Son, who has been keeping it to himself, finally reveals why he always keeps his distance from his family, which is because his family considers DIL not part of the family.

8. Chinese New Year visit



Figure 9. Visit Amah during the Chinese New Year
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: Kiang, Pinn, and Rainbow finally visit Amah, who can no longer speak and move during Chinese New Year. Pinn steps out of the car first to greet M, then goes inside to drop off Rainbow. Kiang sits in the car until Pinn persuades him. Kiang and Pinn finally meet Amah, who begins to cry when she hears Kiang's voice.

Signified: This scene shows that DIL changes. She dares to enter M's house first. It shows that DIL can mediate between Sons and MIL when they are in conflict, and she can persuade Sons to meet with MIL and his family. The position in this film also changes; DIL, who is usually at the end or behind Son, becomes in front and the mediator of this family. Once inside the house, DIL remains in a lower sitting position near MIL's feet.

9. Qingming Festival (closing)



Figure 10. Qingming Closing Scene
(Source: netflix.com)

Signifier: All the families gather to honor Amah during the Qingming festival. Pinn and Rainbow finally attended and helped with the Qingming preparations. Chew instructs Pinn to arrange the food at Amah's grave. Pinn also tries to arrange it carefully.

Signified: This scene shows that DIL has been considered part of the family. She is actively involved in the preparation of the festival but with a kneeling posture to demonstrate respect toward Amah's spirit. This posture aligns with Chinese-Asian cultural practices, where kneeling signifies respect for others (Feng & Du, 2015). The DIL's position in the scene is also close to the other family members, symbolizing her acceptance into the family.

Discussion

Based on the results, it can be seen that there is a distance between the son, Mother-in-Law (MIL), and Daughter-in-Law (DIL) in the film *Lahn Mah*. There are

three key aspects related to the distance that are visually depicted:

1. There is always a gap between MIL and DIL

The positions of the MIL and DIL in the film are rarely adjacent. There is always someone or a wall separating them. Even when they are side by side, there is always a space between them. This indicates that the relationship between the MIL and DIL is not close. There is a noticeable awkwardness when they meet. This aligns with Morr Serewicz's (2008) view that the MIL and DIL relationship is one without intention. This relationship exists because the son brings them together in marriage. The less they communicate, the more awkward the relationship becomes (Woolley & Greif, 2019).

In the film *Lahn Mah*, when the DIL tries to communicate with the MIL, she only gets minimal responses from the MIL. In contrast, the son receives enthusiastic responses. Also, when they write wishes, MIL only wishes for her children and DIL only wishes for herself. This indicates that parents are closer to their biological children than their in-laws (Koyano et al., 1995, as cited in Nishi et al., 2010).

Unsurprisingly, in the film, the DIL is often depicted as quiet and reluctant to engage in the intrigues of the son's extended family. This is also an effect of patriarchal culture that forces the DIL, as an outsider, to adapt to the son's family and maintain her silence within the family (Srishti & Kumari, 2023). Similarly, in Chinese culture, women are often asked to be submissive and obedient to men because of Confucian understanding, which favors male power (Guo et al., 2017).

2. The Son is in the middle and prefers to be close to the DIL

The Son's position in the film *Lahn Mah* is often between the MIL and DIL. This supports Woolley & Greif's (2019) assertion that the son is a linchpin who brings the MIL and DIL closer. As a linchpin, the son balances the relationship between the MIL and DIL. However, the son often chooses to be near the DIL in the film. Consequently, the son's extended family perceives that he does not care about them. This perception may stem from the concept of filial piety in Asian culture, where children are taught to prioritize the family's wishes over their wishes and obey their parents (Schwartz et al., 2010). Hence, the son's actions are seen as neglectful toward the family.

The reason for the son's behavior is revealed toward the end of the film: he dislikes his wife being misunderstood and treated as if she is not part of the family. This aligns with the research by Gbadamosi et al. (2014), which found that men are more likely to address conflicts using avoidance techniques, meaning they tend to distance themselves from the source of conflict. In this context, the son distances himself from his extended family to minimize conflict between his wife and his family.

On the other hand, in an interview with GSCinemas (2024), Sanya Kunkorn, the actor who portrays Kiang, stated that Kiang struggles to express his feelings openly, but that does not mean he does not care for Amah and his extended family. For a man, being open about his feelings is not easy. In a patriarchal culture that produces toxic masculinity, men are often taught to appear strong and not to show vulnerability (Pramudiya et al., 2023). This makes it difficult for them to articulate their feelings clearly and leads to misunderstandings with those around them.

Therefore, instead of expressing his feelings first, the film *Lahn Mah* visualizes that the son immediately tries to minimize conflict between the MIL and DIL by living in a different house and not spending too much time with his extended family. If there is criticism from the MIL towards the DIL, as seen in the opening scene, the son will try to ensure the DIL does not hear it. The Son maintains the harmony of his household, as criticism from the MIL towards the DIL is often made explicitly and serves as a primary conflict trigger that can worsen relationship development (Han et al., 2023).

3. In certain situations, the DIL can be a mediator

The DIL, whom the son loves, can mediate in the family when the son is at odds with the MIL. This can happen because the son is willing to listen to what the DIL says. In *Lahn Mah*, The DIL dares to leave her usual position when acting as a mediator. She boldly went ahead of her husband to meet his extended family, then invited him to join her. This action changed the dynamic within the film, closing the distance and improving the DIL's relationship with her husband's family.

Thus, it can be observed that the distance between the son, MIL, and DIL evolves as the story progresses. Their relationships improve, and they grow closer during the Chinese New Year celebration, which is believed to be a time to start a new life. Chinese New Year is also a symbol of reunification, where all family members, from wherever they are, gather in one place to celebrate this tradition (Yuan, 2016). In this context, it depicts reconciliation in their family.

Conclusion

This research has shown that nine

scenes in the film *Lahn Mah* depict the distance in the relationships between the son, Mother-in-Law (MIL), and Daughter-in-Law (DIL). This distance changes as the story develops. Whenever the son, MIL, and DIL are in the same frame, there is always a gap between the MIL and DIL. This distance signifies conflict in their relationship, while the son always occupies the center between the MIL and DIL, indicating his role as a linchpin. However, when a dispute arises between the son and MIL, the DIL's position shifts to the center, acting as a mediator between the MIL and Son. This change in position and proximity signifies family reconciliation, which can be seen at the film's end.

However, this study still has limitations as it only examines the depiction of the distances between the three actors in the film *Lahn Mah*. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted to explore the cultural myths embedded in this film through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. Additionally, future studies could analyze the distances between each actor in more depth and their relation to broader family issues, as this film is rich in Chinese-Asian culture. Research on Indonesian audience perceptions of the film *Lahn Mah* would also be interesting to conduct quantitatively, considering the film has successfully attracted millions of viewers outside its country of origin and has a culture similar to that found in Indonesia.

References

- Boonitipat, P. (2024). How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies [Video recording]. GDH.
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The Basics* (3rd ed.). Routledge. www.routledge.com/The-Basics/book-series/B
- Chee, W. chi. (2021). How family policies redefine families: The case of mainland China–Hong Kong cross-border families. *Int J Soc Welfare*, 30, 478–489. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12491>
- Choi, S. hee, Yang, E. C. L., & Tabari, S. (2020). Solo dining in Chinese restaurants: A mixed-method study in Macao. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 90. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102628>
- CNN Indonesia. (2024, June 6). How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies Tembus 3 Juta Penonton. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/hiburan/20240606122208-220-1106593/how-to-make-millions-before-grandma-dies-tembus-3-juta-penonton>. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/hiburan/20240606122208-220-1106593/how-to-make-millions-before-grandma-dies-tembus-3-juta-penonton>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, D. J. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Feng, Ge., & Du, Zhengming. (2015). *Traditional Chinese Rites and Rituals*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gbadamosi, O., Baghestan, A. G., & Al-Mabrouk, K. (2014). Gender, age and nationality: Assessing their impact on conflict resolution styles. *Journal of Management Development*, 33(3), 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-02-2011-0024>
- GSCinemas. (2024, June 22). Making of “How To Make Millions Before Grandma Dies” - Part 3 (Final). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHtTiNiXYdA>. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHtTiNiXYdA>
- Guo, Q., Li, Y., & Yu, S. (2017). In-Law and Mate Preferences in Chinese Society and the Role of Traditional Cultural Values. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474703317703333>

- doi.org/10.1177/1474704917730518
- Han, M., Bing Zhang, Y., Terigele, T., & Lien, S.-C. (2023). Mother/Daughter-In-Law Conflict: Communication in Family Intergenerational Relationships in Chinese Culture. In *Intergenerational Relations - Contemporary Theories, Studies and Policies*. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1002071>
- Lien, Y.-F., Hsieh, C.-M., & Huang, H.-M. (2021). A Dichotomous Relationship of Intergenerational Caregiving within Elderly Care: Disruption/Disharmony and Connection/ Harmony Across the Generations. *International Journal of Nursing & Clinical Practices*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.15344/2394-4978/2021/352>
- Morr Serewicz, M. C. (2008). Toward a Triangular Theory of the Communication and Relationships of In-Laws: Theoretical Proposal and Social Relations Analysis of Relational Satisfaction and Private Disclosure in In-Law Triads. *Journal of Family Communication*, 8(4), 264–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267430802397161>
- Nishi, A., Tamiya, N., Kashiwagi, M., Takahashi, H., Sato, M., & Kawachi, I. (2010). Mothers and daughters-in-law: a prospective study of informal care-giving arrangements and survival in Japan. *BMC Geriatrics*, 10(61). <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2318/10/61>
- Pramudiya, A., Oktoma, E., & Yuniarti, Y. (2023). The Representation of Toxic Masculinity in the “Do Revenge” Movie. *Journey: Journal of English Language and Pedagogy*, 6(3), 721–732. <https://doi.org/10.33503/journey.v6i3.3210>
- Schwartz, S. J., Weisskirch, R. S., Hurley, E. A., Zamboanga, B. L., Park, I. J. K., Kim, S. Y., Umaña-Taylor, A., Castillo, L. G., Brown, E., & Greene, A. D. (2010). Communalism, familism, and filial piety: Are they birds of a collectivist feather? *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 16(4), 548–560. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021370>
- Soeda, A., & Araki, C. (1999). Elder Abuse by Daughters-in-Law in Japan. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 11(1), 47–58. https://doi.org/10.1300/J084v11n01_03
- Srishti, & Kumari, S. (2023). Culture Of Silence Among the daughters in Laws of Bisavli Village, Mathura District, Uttar Pradesh: A Sociological Study. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(4), 1–15. www.ijfmr.com
- Wang, X., Gao, C., & Feng, M. (2021). Owner offspring gender and long-term resource allocation in Chinese family firms. *Int J Fin Econ*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijfe.2549>
- Woolley, M. E., & Greif, G. L. (2019). Mother-in-Law Reports of Closeness to Daughter-in-Law: The Determinant Triangle with the Son and Husband. *Social Work*, 64(1), 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy055>
- Yuan, H. (2016). The Origin of Chinese New Year. *SMS-I-Media Tourism Express*, 1, 1. http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pubhttp://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub/115