



ADVANCE

Disney and Pixar's all-new original feature film "Turning Red" introduces Meilin Lee, a confident, slightly dorky 13-year-old with a solid group of friends, an admirable record in school and a better-than-average relationship with her family for the most part. Meilin—Mei to her friends—has every reason to expect smooth sailing throughout the rest of her middle school career. But according to director Domee Shi, that's not how life goes for most 13-year-olds. "I really wanted to explore the conflicts of a young teen girl—how she's torn between being a good daughter and embracing her true messy self."

The mother-daughter relationship takes center stage in "Turning Red," and it's a theme that's very close to the director's heart. Shi, who helmed Pixar's 2018 Oscar®-winning short "Bao," says that when she was asked why the little dumpling in the short was male, her response was—it turns out—prophetic. "I said it would take a whole feature to unpack the mother-daughter relationship," says Shi. "It was actually a big motivating factor in my pitch for 'Turning Red.' It's never black and white. At the beginning of the movie, Mei genuinely loves her relationship with her mom, but she's being pulled in new directions—as everyone her age is. It's a time of big changes."

In "Turning Red," this phase of growing up is marked in an unexpected, can't hide-from-it, larger-than-life way: when Mei's emotions get the better of her, she "poofs" into a giant red panda. "One minute, everything's perfect," says Shi. "And then, just like with all of us, all of a sudden there's terror everywhere. She's way taller, hungrier, more emotional. She's, in fact, turned into a giant red panda, and the only way to turn back into a human girl is to take deep breaths, calm herself down and control her emotions. It's kind of like 'The Incredible Hulk,' but cuter."

According to producer Lindsey Collins, "Turning Red" is set in Toronto, Canada, in the early 2000s. "It takes place in a familiar time and place that kind of roots us all in reality," says Collins. "It's not a magical world. That's important because the story itself is pretty fantastical with a girl that hits a magical kind of puberty and turns into a big red panda—yet we can all still relate."

“It’s a coming-of-age story about change and those transitional moments,” continues Collins. “It’s about that time in our lives when we’re trying to figure out who we are. We have a girl who is torn between her family and her friends, learning that she’s not at all who she thought she was. And we have the mother whose daughter is suddenly interested in strange music and boys—a mother who struggles with letting go so her child can become who she needs to be. It’s a universal theme that rings true whether you’re the parent, the child, or maybe both.”

But, says Collins, it’s not just that profound relatability that sets “Turning Red” apart from other coming-of-age stories—it’s Shi’s approach to filmmaking. “Domee has an energy to her that I find really engaging—she’s an engine,” says Collins. “She moves fast; she’s super decisive. She brings an unexpected and unapologetic quirkiness to her storytelling, the stylization, and to the entire film.”

Filmmakers called on newcomer Rosalie Chiang as the voice of Meilin; Sandra Oh (“The Chair,” “Killing Eve”) lends her voice to Mei’s protective, if not slightly overbearing mother, Ming. Mei’s tightknit group of friends are voiced by Ava Morse (“Ron’s Gone Wrong”) as Miriam, Maitreyi Ramakrishnan (“Never Have I Ever”) as Priya, and Hyein Park as Abby. The voice cast also includes Orion Lee (“First Cow”) as Mei’s dad, Jin, Wai Ching Ho (“Daredevil,” “Iron Fist”) as Grandma, Tristan Allerick Chen (“The Barbarian and the Troll”) as classmate Tyler, and Addison Chandler (“American Horror Story”) as Mei’s sudden secret crush Devon. Rounding out the voice cast are James Hong (“Big Trouble in Little China,” “Kung Fu Panda: The Paws of Destiny”), Lori Tan Chinn (“Awkwafina Is Nora from Queens”), Lillian Lim (“Motherland: Fort Salem,” “Meditation Park”), Mia Tagano (“Tantalus: Behind the Mask,” “Law & Order: Criminal Intent”), Sherry Cola (“Good Trouble”), Sasha Roiz (“Grimm”) and Lily Sanfelippo (“Spidey and His Amazing Friends,” “Firebuds”).

“Turning Red” introduces Pixar’s first-ever boy band, 4*Town. Filmmakers called on GRAMMY®-winning singer-songwriters Billie Eilish and FINNEAS to write the fictional band’s songs—three in total. “When we first started talking about Billie Eilish and FINNEAS—back before they’d won a billion GRAMMYS—we could see then how they had their finger on the pulse,” says Collins. “We were big fans. We met with them and pitched this crazy idea of a boy band, asking if they’d be interested in writing and producing the songs. They were!”

Providing the harmonious voices of the members of 4*Town are Jordan Fisher, Grayson Villanueva, Josh Levi, Topher Ngo and Finneas O’Connell.

GRAMMY®, Oscar®- and Emmy®-winning Swedish composer Ludwig Göransson (“Black Panther,” “The Mandalorian”) is composing the score for “Turning Red.” “I’ve been a fan of his for a while,” says Shi. “We were drawn to his versatility—he’s a composer, but he also produces pop music. We knew he would help us create a very unique sound.”

Directed by Academy Award® winner Domee Shi (Pixar short “Bao”) and produced by Lindsey Collins, “Turning Red” launches exclusively on Disney+ on March 11, 2022.

FRIENDS, FAMILY AND 4*TOWN **Who's Who in "Turning Red"**

Director Domee Shi kicked off efforts behind "Turning Red" with an important mission topping her to-do list: getting to know her characters. "I think finding the characters as early as possible is the most important thing to making a good story," she says. "The first goal of a filmmaker is having the audience fall in love with your characters—being interested enough in them in those first five to ten minutes to want to sit down and follow their journey for the next hour and a half."

Shi and her team went on to develop the kind of characters that would capture viewers' hearts and hold on till the credits rolled. Leading the pack, of course, is 13-year-old Meilin Lee, and Shi surrounded her protagonist with a crew of friends and family—each with a distinct personality that both complements and contrasts with Mei as she navigates adolescence. "This is a very personal story for Domee," says producer Lindsey Collins. "It's a mother-daughter story set in the early 2000s, which is super cool. And it has a voice that feels very different—the reaction here at Pixar to the first scene [we shared internally] mirrored the way that I feel about this film: I've never seen this before."

The look of the characters, adds Collins, is similarly distinct. "Everyone had to tap their inner 13-year-olds to capture the style Domee wanted," says Collins. "It's a world seen through the eyes of Mei. Everything is vibrant and colorful. The design is textured and tactile and chunky, and the animation style and, every now and then, facial expressions are pushed. The characters are caricatured, and the way they move and pose is fresh. Domee's stylization is extended through art, animation, camera and lighting, and her passion for anime shines through."

Says Shi, "I grew up watching anime. I love how fast and loose they play with emotion—how the expressions can change in an instant. It just felt perfect for a film about an adolescent girl who's on an emotional roller coaster with all of the mood swings."

The character lineup includes Mei, her inner circle of friends and family and members of a boy band known as 4*Town. Filmmakers called on a rich roster of voice talent to help bring the characters to life. "The Toronto setting of this story called for a diverse cast," says associate executive producer Adrian Molina. "Hopefully more and more people are seeing experiences like their own on the big screen. 'Turning Red' offers a unique perspective of a 13-year-old Chinese Canadian that—at its heart—shows how we're all connected."

CHARACTER LINEUP

MEILIN LEE is a middle-school force of nature. Exuberant, ambitious and over-achieving, Chinese-Canadian Meilin excels at school and at home. Her posse of loyal besties always has her back—they share a borderline out-of-control obsession with boy band 4*Town—but what 13-year-old doesn't? At home, Mei is a dutiful and driven keeper of the ancestral family temple, working contentedly alongside her mother, Ming. But when the teen mysteriously begins to "poof" into a giant, uber-emotional red panda

at the most inconvenient times, a gulf opens up between Mei and her mom, forcing a reckoning between Mei's two selves: the spirited teenager and the obedient daughter.

"She's spunky, confident, nerdy, passionate, weird and a little bit snooty," says Shi of her main character. "When I was her age, I was Mei. I was writing Harry Potter fan fiction, passionately drawing fan art. I had a secret sketch book that my parents did not know about. Now that I'm grown, I know so many amazing women who all had nerdy beginnings. I just wanted to show that with Mei."

Newcomer Rosalie Chiang lends her voice to Mei. Says Collins, "Rosalie is this amazing girl who we auditioned in the beginning to do the scratch—or temporary—recordings as we were working on the story. She's super close to her mom, she was home-schooled and an A-student—in many ways she's just like Mei. Her genuine, unrehearsed, authentic performance breathed such life into Mei. After two years, we were ready to cast the role. We listened to a lot of auditions, but we'd already fallen in love with Rosalie, and in the end couldn't imagine Mei being voiced by anybody else."

RED PANDA MEI is the same Mei her friends and family know and love—but in the form of an unpredictable, eight-foot-tall, smelly and inadvertently destructive red panda. She may be fluffy and impossibly cute, but Red Panda Mei represents Mei at her most vulnerable, messy and true self. "We're basically using the red panda as an adorable metaphor for the very unadorable phenomenon of puberty," says Shi.

MING LEE is a proud wife, devoted mother and hardworking keeper of the Lee Family Temple in Toronto's Chinatown. Elegantly turned out and poised at all times, Ming takes her professional duties seriously—but she's even more dedicated to keeping an eye on her precious daughter, Meilin. There's no doubt, Ming is fierce, stubborn, funny, controlling, and—as Mei would put it—a lot, but the deep love she has for her family is always apparent. "Ming is a compilation of all of the very strong and awesome Asian women in my life," says Shi. "Ming can be intense, but all of the crazy stuff she does is motivated by her love for her daughter."

Filmmakers called on Sandra Oh to voice Ming. "She's a tricky character," says Collins. "Ming is a force—in the wrong hands, she could come off as unlikable. It's a balancing act—she's super strong, yet funny and a little wacky. Then the next minute, she's incredibly nurturing. When Sandra went into the recording booth for the first time—just to play around and see what she could bring to the role—she was everything we imagined and more. She's such a pro—a total gift."

JIN LEE, the quiet, steady presence in the Lee family, works hard and aspires to a life of simple pleasures: cooking a good meal for his family, sneaking the occasional donut, and gardening. He's a necessary balance to his strong-willed wife, Ming, and a doting and loving father to his daughter, Mei. But when an ancient phenomenon throws his family into chaos, Jin's quiet life is upended.

Says Shi, “He’s the soft-but-stoic rock of the family. He’s loosely inspired by my dad, but my dad is a little bit louder. He’s a good complement to Ming—he pulls her back down to Earth. He’s the quiet hero.”

Orion Lee voices Jin. “I first saw him in a film called ‘First Cow,’” says Shi. “There’s something very soothing about his voice that drew me to him. He can give Mei comforting words of wisdom, and then turn around and offer up very funny dad jokes.”

MIRIAM is loyal, easygoing and a total goof who can make her besties laugh when they need it most. A bit of a tomboy, Miriam regularly rocks a flannel shirt and slouchy cap, and shares her friends’ obsession with boy band 4*Town. Mei’s mom, however, is not a fan of Miriam. Ming sees Miriam as a threat to her relationship with her daughter, despite the girl’s stellar support for Mei.

According to screenwriter Julia Cho, the unwavering support of Miriam and all of Mei’s friends is no accident. “We’d all seen bullying and mean girls in film and television,” says Cho. “Domee really wanted to do something different. Mei’s friends don’t judge each other or put each other down. When you really look at a lot of friendships—mine, my daughter’s or Domee’s within Pixar—they’re nurturing and supportive. I love emphasizing that component of female friendships because for too long the narrative has been that we’re competitive, hierarchical and we tear each other down. The truth is different. And that became a really important part of the movie.”

Ava Morse lends her voice to Miriam. “She’s the coolest 15-year-old you’ll ever meet,” says producer Lindsey Collins. “She’s a drummer and a singer. Her gravelly voice is just perfect for Miriam.

PRIYA is meticulous yet artsy, passionate yet stoic. She’s a quiet wild card with a deadpan sense of humor and a calm and collected approach to school, friendship and just about anything—except 4*Town. Even Priya can’t contain her love of 4*Town.

“Priya represents me and my friends near the end of middle school,” says Shi. “We discovered vampires, punk rock and emo. I think Priya is headed in that direction.”

Maitreyi Ramakrishnan was cast as the voice of Priya.

ABBY is a stick of dynamite—a fierce-but-tiny warrior who will not hesitate to launch herself at anyone who threatens her besties. The opposite of shy, Abby is not afraid to be heard. She does have a soft spot for Red Panda Mei, however. The extreme fluff is just too hard not to hug.

“Abby is Mei’s feisty Korean friend,” says director Domee Shi. “And she’s voiced by Hyein Park.”

TYLER NGUYEN-BAKER is that kid everyone knows from middle school—the relentlessly annoying, oddly aggressive classmate who seems to pop up at the worst

possible times. Tyler may play the role of jerk—but deep down, he has all the same fears and doubts of every other middle schooler.

Tristan Allerick Chen was called on to voice Tyler.

4*TOWN, the hottest, coolest boy band of all time, is behind songs like “Nobody Like U”—the single from their latest album that’s climbing all the charts. Their concerts are truly epic, featuring high-flying theatrics, lights, pyrotechnics and—best of all—the five dreamy members of 4*Town.

According to Shi, if you set a 13-year-old girl’s coming-of-age story in the early 2000s, it’s pretty much mandatory to include a boy band. “We needed our character Mei to be obsessed with something that her mom would not approve of,” says Shi. “Boy bands were the first step into the world of boys for a lot of girls that age. The guys were all super pretty, polished, soft and loving, and they had of way of bringing girls and their besties together. Plus, I thought it’d be really cool to create an animated boy band.”

The voices behind Pixar’s first-ever boy band include Jordan Fisher as Robaire, Finneas O’Connell as Jesse, Topher Ngo as Aaron T., Grayson Villanueva as Tae Young, and Josh Levi as Aaron Z. Acclaimed singer-songwriters Billie Eilish and FINNEAS to wrote three songs for 4*Town. Says Shi, “We knew early on that we needed three different kinds of songs. We had to have that one hit that everybody knows. Then there’s the really earnest, heart-on-your-sleeves power ballad, and finally the energetic party show-stopper.”

Adds producer Lindsey Collins, “The songs the guys sing—and that Mei and her friends belt out whenever they can—are all original songs. They sound so much like the early 2000s, that when we’ve shown our reels internally, people just tune in and start singing along as if they can remember the music from their high school days.”

According to executive producer Dan Scanlon, while the process was fun—revealing hidden boy-band fans throughout Pixar as 4*Town took shape—filmmakers took it all very seriously. “This band creates the most important music of Mei and her friends’ generation,” he says. “In many ways music shapes our experience at that age—and this is Mei’s story. It wouldn’t be complete without 4*Town.”