

Family Ethics Through the Lens of Cinema: An Interpretation of Power Imbalance and Life Growth in Grandmother's Grandson

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the Thai film *Grandma's Grandson* as its subject of study, delving into the family ethics portrayed in the film from a visual perspective. By analyzing its visual narrative, the film reveals the ethical conflicts arising from the collision of traditional and modern values within the family, as well as the entanglement of interests and familial affection. Exploring family power structures reveals power imbalances stemming from economic status and gender factors, as well as the negative impact of such imbalances on family relationships. At the same time, observe A'an's personal growth as he navigates domestic trivialities and hardships, prompting reflection on the meaning of life. This study aims to prompt public reflection on family ethics, power structures, and individual growth in real life through an analysis of the film, thereby offering new perspectives and references for research in related fields.

KEYWORDS

Grandma's grandson; Family ethics; Power structure; Life growth

1 Introduction

The family serves as the foundational arena for emotional bonds. Amidst the collision of traditional and modern values in contemporary society, ethical dilemmas within the family are frequently depicted in visual media. The Thai film *Grandma's Grandson* uses everyday storytelling to depict the conflicts and warmth within an ordinary family: it explores the younger generation's utilitarian interpretation of traditional filial piety and its clash with elders' values, as well as the imbalance of power within the family caused by economic and gender factors. It also chronicles the protagonist A'an's journey from calculatingly pursuing his grandmother's affection to genuinely accompanying her. This paper analyzes the film from a visual perspective, examining family ethical conflicts, the impact of power imbalances, and character development and transformation. It offers insights into contemporary family ethics and individual family growth trajectories, while also introducing new perspectives to related research.

2 Family Ethical Conflicts in Visual Narratives

2.1 The Clash Between Traditional and Modern Concepts

In Asian societies like Thailand, traditional and modern values run like two intertwined yet frequently clashing trajectories, profoundly shaping characters' behaviors and the trajectory of family relationships. This clash of perspectives is vividly illustrated at two critical levels: the concept of filial piety and family values.

From the perspective of the hollowing out of filial piety, A'an's actions at the film's outset serve as a mirror, clearly reflecting the complex attitudes toward traditional filial piety held by some young people today. A'an's initial approach to his grandmother stemmed not from any traditional filial piety or devotion to elders, but rather from a calculated scheme to inherit her estate after her death. Such utilitarian behavior runs counter to the care and devotion advocated by filial piety. After Grandma fell ill, her children placed her in a nursing home for convenience, hoping to entrust the nursing home with full responsibility for her care. The most striking image is that of the "ill-fitting slippers" —purchased by the eldest son as an act of filial piety, yet never considering his mother's actual needs, serving as a poignant metaphor for the hollow formality of modern-day support. These actions reveal how people neglect the elderly in contemporary society. While they appear to give their grandmother the best, they overlook her true feelings and thoughts, failing to understand what lies within her heart. It is noteworthy that the film does not simply pit tradition against modernity. A'an taught his grandmother how to video call and use beauty filters to document her illness, showcasing the younger generation's creative transformation of tradition. Meanwhile, A'an's care for his grandmother evolved from an initial utilitarian approach to a genuine understanding of her hardships and struggles. His concern for her was no longer superficial but came from the heart. This mutual adaptation suggests that true intergenerational reconciliation lies not in an either-or choice, but in finding contemporary expressions for traditional sentiments.

Differences in family values also set off waves of conflict throughout the film. Grandma is undoubtedly a staunch guardian of traditional family values. In her view, the continuation of the family line and the distribution of property follow a set of established rules. Favoring sons in property distribution is one of the traditional values she upholds. This reflects the traditional societal belief that men bear primary responsibility for family continuity, with sons expected to carry on the family line and uphold the family's reputation. However, children raised in the modern social environment have developed entirely different value pursuits. They place greater emphasis on the realization of personal value,

pursuing equal and fair rights. In property distribution, they seek to break traditional gender boundaries, favoring allocation based on each child's contribution to the family or simply from an equality perspective. Ah An's mother is a prime example. For years, she devoted herself to caring for her mother-in-law and poured immense effort into the family. Yet when it came to dividing the estate, traditional notions held her back, preventing her from standing on equal footing with her sons. This left her feeling deeply wronged and unfairly treated, prompting her to lament with resignation: "Daughters inherit cancer, sons inherit the family fortune." This disparity frequently sparks conflicts within families. During gatherings, discussions about property and elder care often reach an impasse due to differing values between grandmothers and their children. Each party stands firm on their own values, refusing to yield, which only intensifies family tensions.

2.2 The Entanglement of Self-Interest and Family Ties

In the visual narrative of *Grandmother's Grandson*, the entanglement of self-interest and familial affection runs like a hidden thread through the mundane routines of family life. It both tears apart the warmth of blood ties and, as conflicts intensify, reveals the intricate tapestry of human nature. This entanglement is not contrived but a true reflection rooted in reality, allowing audiences to feel the tension of family ethics within familiar settings.

The conflicts arising from inheritance disputes are the most direct manifestation of how financial interests erode familial bonds. When economic rationality invades the realm of family life, the spirit of altruism among family members is no longer held as a guiding principle. The remnants of traditional family ethics and morals prove insufficient to restrain people's behavior, and the vulnerable members of the family become a heavy burden—even a liability^[1]. At the film's opening, upon learning his cousin had inherited property for caring for her gravely ill grandfather, Ah An immediately conceived the idea of "replicating that success." With clear utilitarian motives, he returned to his maternal grandmother's side. At this moment, he turned a deaf ear to his grandmother's coughing, turned a blind eye to her toil running the stall alone, and even became engrossed in mobile games while accompanying her to sweep the graves—to him, family ties were nothing more than bargaining chips for inheritance. This mindset is far from unique; other relatives have similarly lost themselves in the vortex of self-interest: his maternal uncle, leveraging his financial advantage, meddles in grandmother's eldercare arrangements while offering little genuine care. Younger uncle went so far as to secretly embezzle 200,000 baht from her hard-earned savings, treating her life's savings as his rightful "pocket money." When family gatherings turn into property negotiations, and visits to the elderly become inheritance reconnaissance, the warmth of blood ties gradually cools amid repeated calculations. The most heartrending moment came during Grandma's final days as the family debated property distribution. Uncle's greed clashed sharply with Ah An's confrontational questioning, while Grandma's silence seemed like a silent lament over the erosion of familial bonds.

But the film's profound insight lies in its portrayal of how emotion can transcend material constraints. In his time with his grandmother, the seemingly "useless" details of daily life—arguing over wins and losses while playing cards with her, remembering the location of her favorite fried fish stall, listening to her reminisce about her youth—gradually eroded his initial sense of purpose. When he witnessed his grandmother's humiliation as she was refused money by his older brother to buy a burial plot, and saw the frailty of the elderly woman lying awake at night in agony, the calculations of self-interest began to give way to compassion within his heart. Especially in that scene at the nursing home, Ah An gazed at his grandmother lying in bed and suddenly realized that the elderly woman before him wasn't an object, but a relative whose rough hands had guided him through his childhood. He ultimately chose to bring his grandmother home, soothing her pain by humming songs. In that moment, familial affection broke free from the shackles of self-interest, revealing its true warmth. This transformation was not a sudden epiphany, but rather a gradual process where material desires were slowly dissolved by the warmth of human kindness through day after day of shared living. It was like the porridge my grandmother simmered—seemingly plain, yet through the slow stewing of time, it developed the most touching flavor.

The entanglement of interests and familial affection essentially serves as a mirror reflecting family relationships in modern society. When traditional ethics collide with the impact of the market economy, and when the awakening of individual consciousness clashes with the inertia of the family community, such contradictions take on universal significance. The film neither simplistically condemns the pursuit of profit nor idealizes family bonds as flawless. Instead, it authentically portrays the tug-of-war between these two forces—much like when Ah An finally receives the money his grandmother secretly saved for him. This inheritance, laden with guilt and affection, is not only a material gift but also an emotional compensation. It leaves audiences sighing with the realization: The most precious thing in a family is never the name on the property deed, but those moments when people set aside calculations and choose to be present with genuine care.

3 Imbalance in Family Power Structures and Relationships

3.1 An Economic Status-dominated Power Structure

In this film, money also serves as a pivotal force driving the narrative forward. Economic standing operates like an invisible hand, quietly manipulating the balance of power within the family. Beneath the surface of seemingly harmonious relationships lies a hidden struggle over the inheritance.

Eldest uncle, relying on his affluent background, suggested bringing Grandma home to live after she fell ill. Yet even as

her eldest son, Grandma had never once visited his home before. eldest uncle, relying on his affluent background, suggested bringing Grandma to live with him after she fell ill. Yet even as the eldest son, had she ever visited her sons' homes before. Also he convinced he held the authority, never once inquired about her wishes. He unilaterally decided she should give up the porridge shop, believing he had arranged everything perfectly. He even euphemistically called himself her "full-time son." he also gave A'an some money, saying it was compensation for taking care of Grandma. This confidence doesn't stem from being the eldest brother, but from the balance in his bank account that can cover expenses. While it appears responsible, it actually uses money to define the boundaries of his "responsibilities." Additionally, when Grandma went to her brother hoping to get a million yuan to buy a burial plot, not only did he refuse her, but his tone was so sharp it felt downright humiliating. Since he had inherited his parents' estate and enjoyed a very solid financial foundation, this also reflected his authority and dominant position within the family. Grandma spent her entire life caring for her parents yet received nothing in return; when she went to borrow money, she was met with cold rejection.

In stark contrast to eldest uncle and older brother stands the voiceless position of the economically disadvantaged. A'an's mother switched to night shifts to care for her grandmother. Though she couldn't offer much financial support, she had no say when her eldest uncle proposed his plan. She could only show her devotion through her actions. The younger uncle was a classic example of economic vulnerability. Without steady employment, he not only felt ashamed among his siblings but also often adopted a fawning attitude toward his grandmother. When he stole her savings, it was less about greed than a twisted act of defiance born from years of being at the bottom of the power hierarchy. He sought to prove his existence through this act, only to deepen his own marginalization. In traditional family ethics, elders were supposed to be the core of authority. Yet under the leverage of economic forces, Grandma's opinions gradually became marginalized. Family members always believed they were treating her well, yet overlooked her own feelings. When family bonds are measured by money, those who give the most affection become the lightest weights on the scales of power.

3.2 Gender-based Inequality in the Family

From a gender perspective, women in the film face multiple dilemmas within the family. These challenges intertwine the constraints of traditional beliefs with the pressures of practical interests, making their navigating familial relationships an arduous journey. A'an's mother cares for her family day after day, devoting much of her time to family bonds. She said it was only natural for her to take care of her sick grandmother, otherwise people would say she was unfilial. Perhaps she was the granddaughter who loved her grandmother most among the three children, yet she also felt secretly hurt when her grandmother gave the house to the younger uncle. She too yearned for recognition and affection. Grandma herself was also a victim of these gender constraints. She cared for her own parents but received no inheritance; instead, it went to her brother. The notion that "it is a woman's duty to take care of the family" severely undervalues women's labor. Their hard work is taken for granted, denied the respect and recognition it deserves, leaving them to silently endure the inner resentment and disappointment.

Despite their differing behaviors, the male characters in the film all implicitly assume their right to inherit the family estate. Men occupy the position of protectors within the family shelter relationship^[2]. A'an's initial motive for approaching his grandmother was the property, while his uncles directly contested ownership rights, even resorting to using family ties as bargaining chips. However, the film also reveals the contradictions of men within the family power structure through A'an's transformation—he is both a beneficiary of traditional inheritance rights and undergoes moral reflection upon witnessing the sacrifices made by women. Ultimately, he relinquished his claim to the inheritance and used the money his grandmother had saved for him to purchase her burial plot. This act served as both a rebellion against gender inequality and a sign of the new generation of men re-evaluating traditional power structures.

4 Reflections on Life and Growth in Film

4.1 Attitude Toward the Finiteness of Life

The film unfolds with gentle warmth, portraying the passage of life as an inescapable natural law. The film avoids using intense dramatic conflict to convey the weight of death. Instead, it allows audiences to witness the fear, acceptance, and sudden realizations that arise during life's countdown through the emotions flowing within everyday details.

Grandmother's attitude toward life's finitude was like a cup of tea slowly cooling, carrying the serenity of years lived and a quiet regret. After being diagnosed with a terminal illness, she did not succumb to hysterical breakdowns. Each morning, she continued setting up her porridge stall, carefully wiping the sacred water pot with her wrinkled hands—these lifelong habits became her way of resisting the passage of life. Grandma's friend A'yu also had cancer. They shared their conditions with each other in a matter-of-fact tone, as if it were just another minor detail in their daily lives. Here, we can clearly see the elderly's attitude toward life—rather than fearing death, they embraced it with serenity, quietly awaiting its arrival. But even though Grandma had prepared herself, she still feared loneliness and pain. As she endured illness in the nursing home, her eyes held a mix of weariness and resignation, as if saying, "Let it be." So when A'an brought Grandma home, she finally felt the warmth of companionship.

The film's final revelation is profoundly moving: only by accepting life's limitations can we truly cherish the connections we have in the present moment. And perhaps the warmest way to confront the anxiety of death is through

understanding and companionship between generations.

4.2 The Character's Growth and Transformation

The characters' growth and transformation in the film deeply resonate with audiences, sparking profound reflection. This growth is not a dramatic transformation, but rather something hidden within the folds of everyday life. Through repeated arguments, reconciliations, and silences, it completes a renewed understanding of both self and family bonds.

A'an's growth trajectory forms the film's most distinct narrative thread of maturation, like a pruned potted plant shedding its tangled branches to reveal an upright form. When he first appeared, he was a young man hollowed out by life's hardships: unemployed, addicted to video games, and even his desire to care for his grandmother was tinged with the calculation of "inheriting her estate." The turning point came in those unassuming moments: he remembered the location of the fried fish stall his grandmother loved, deliberately letting her win at mahjong, the look of heartache in his eyes when his brother drove her away, noticing her shoes didn't fit properly and making a special trip to buy her new ones. From "filial piety toward heritage" to "staying for companionship," A'an's transformation essentially involved shedding the shell of self-centeredness: he began to read his grandmother's expressions and grew furious when the younger uncle stole her savings. In the end, the young man who had returned to his grandmother's side with ulterior motives transformed into a true adult who genuinely cared for her. His growth lay in learning to see things from others' perspectives and recognizing the unbreakable bonds that tie family members together.

The power of familial affection lies in its selfless devotion—enduring and timeless, transcending borders and eras. It enriches the flesh of kinship and strengthens its very bones^[3]. The collective growth of family bonds is like a pot of porridge simmering slowly over low heat. Through the careful balance of arguments and tolerance, it distills the authentic flavor of familial affection. In the early part of the film, this family resembles more of a "community of interests": visiting Grandma weekly becomes a chore, and when she wants to play cards with everyone, the eldest son declines, sparking an argument. Grandma can only silently pack away the cards. As the story unfolds, misunderstandings among family members gradually dissolve. The children all feel they've been treated unfairly to some extent, but through A'an's mediation, they gradually come to understand their grandmother's well-intentioned efforts. She had always remembered her children's kindness and strived with all her might to balance everything. Finally, my eldest uncle let go of his worries and took Grandma's hand, saying, "You have a wonderful grandson who's always been taking care of you."

The growth depicted in films is never about "becoming a perfect person," but rather about "accepting the imperfections in oneself and others." A'an still feels lost, and barriers remain between family members, but through this journey of life and familial bonds, they have all learned to treat each other with greater tenderness. Just like the money left behind by Grandma, it ultimately didn't become a blade that tore apart family bonds. Instead, it became the cornerstone for A'an to rebuild his life. The true essence of growing up, perhaps, lies in recognizing life's trivialities and cruelties, yet still choosing to believe: love and companionship are the true forces that carry us through the years.

5 Conclusion

Grandma's Grandson unfolds a vividly detailed portrait of family life, rich with the warmth of everyday moments. Yet the most moving aspect of this tableau is the profound growth and transformation its characters undergo as they navigate the tug-of-war between familial bonds and the harsh realities of life. From A'an's shift from self-interest to sincerity, to the entire family moving beyond entangled interests toward heartfelt bonds, the film uses its most unadorned storytelling to tell us: growing up is never a lone hero's adventure, but rather a gradual journey of learning understanding and acceptance within the bonds of family. Looking back at the conflicts over family ethics and the imbalance of power structures depicted in the film, reconciliation ultimately emerges through the characters' personal growth. The film ultimately points to an inquiry into the essence of life. Facing life's finite nature, A'an's transformation from avoidance to acceptance, and his family's shift from estrangement to companionship, all speak to the same truth: The value of life lies not in what one possesses, but in what one has given; the meaning of family lies not in perpetual perfection, but in the willingness to adjust one's course for each other. As the curtain fell, the family gathered to sweep the grave of their grandmother. An casually scattered the flowers, but a sudden gust of wind swept through. He knew it was his grandmother coming to find him. The film concludes with A'an's serene and reassuring smile, leaving us in reality with a profound insight: within families, less scheming and more companionship is the best way to combat the passage of time.

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