

Film Review of *The Farewell*

By

Emily Stier Adler

“The Farewell” (2019), based on writer and director Lulu Wang’s experiences and those of her extended family, is a gentle and often funny film covering many sociological topics. Chief among them are the cultural practices around serious illness, caring for the elderly, the place of food in family gatherings, expressing emotions, cemetery and burial rituals, and the Chinese-American immigrant experience.

Opening with the message that the film is “based on an actual lie” the film focuses on Billi (played with charm and grace by Awkwafina), a millennial New Yorker who left the northeastern Chinese city of Changchun as a six-year old. Billi remains close to her grandmother although she has not returned to China for a visit. Nia Nia (Mandarin for paternal grandmother), Nia Nia’s sister and her children and many other relatives stayed. As the film opens, Nia Nia’s sister is told about Nia Nia’s illness -- stage 4 lung cancer. The central issue is whether to tell Nia Nia about the diagnosis. The doctors and hospital honor the family’s decision to keep the information from Nia Nia. Except for Billi, all agree that Nia Nia *not* be told she has only months to live. One family member tells Billi that while Billi thinks one’s life belongs to one’s self, it does not. Instead, one’s life belongs to the family. The family has a duty to carry the emotional burden of a family member’s illness so that the person can have joy in her final days.

This Chinese tradition is in direct contradiction to Billi’s understanding of the American practice of telling the truth about illness. Billi questions the family, asking if grief should be allowed expression and the dying given a chance to say farewell. The family is adamant that they will not tell Nia Nia and, in order to visit before her death, the family gathers in Changchun for a (faux?) wedding of a cousin who lives in Japan.

Billi ignores her parents’ request to stay home for fear she has become too American to hide her emotions and give away the secret. Showing up at Nia Nia’s house at first Billi’s grief is as apparent as is her joy seeing Nia Nia and rediscovering her homeland and kin. The strong emotional bond among all family members and Nia Nia is clear even as they keep the truth from her.

For her part, Nia Nia never learns the seriousness of her illness and we see her as energetic and competent despite some symptoms. She does her morning exercises and organizes the elaborate wedding banquet for extended family and friends, happy to be in control and having her two sons and their families with her for the first time in decades.

In addition to the central issue of how to deal with serious illness, the film covers other cultural practices. In one scene, the family visits a cemetery to pay respect to Billi’s deceased grandfather. Traditional Chinese customs including professional mourners who weep loudly while accompanying family mourners are depicted. Nia Nia and the family gather around the grave, burn things as a sacrifice, say some prayers, leave food the grandfather liked and debate about leaving a lit cigarette as he had been a smoker.

Food sustains immigrants on their real and cultural journeys and helps them bridge the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar (Kershen, 2002). In Changchun, Billi and her family eat familiar food and, as in many cultures, engage in many conversations around a table. In many scenes the family talks over food at home, in restaurants and at the wedding banquet with huge crabs and other delicacies in abundance at each meal. The wedding banquet is especially elaborate with a great many friends and relatives in attendance and a great deal of eating, drinking and smoking. Emotional

karaoke and toasts complete the banquet.

Billi's return to China and the large extended clan she doesn't remember after years of living in a small nuclear family in New York illuminates the immigrant experience. Neither fully Chinese nor fully American, Billi must accept her divided identity as a Chinese American and learn to be herself. The differences in cultural values are apparent in the comment made by an uncle. He says that in China, one's life is part of the whole while Americans pursue individual happiness. Billi and her parents seem to exhibit "shifted identity" (Liu, 2015) where cultural identity is constantly negotiated and reconstructed as a sort of alternating identity, rather than blending their cultural identities together. This kind of identity is favored by many immigrants as they navigate bicultural environments to fit in different contexts (Liu, 2015).

In one cultural shift, Billi offers to stay behind to take care of her grandmother rather than leaving her in the care of Nia Nia's sister and niece. But her offer is rejected and Billi returns to America and her own work with her grandmother's blessing. Nia Nia tells her "Your mind is very powerful. You will succeed."

"The Farewell," largely in Mandarin with subtitles and an all Asian cast, speaks to the specific as well as to the universal. Billi and her family share love, face leaving home and saying goodbye to Nia Nia probably for the last time. Although Nia Nia is this family's matriarch, we are all touched by their experiences.

References

Kerшен, Anne J., 2002. *Food in the Migrant Experience*. London: Routledge.

Liu, Shuang. 2015. "Searching for a Sense of Place: Identity Negotiation of Chinese Immigrants." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 46 (May): 26-35.

About the Reviewer: Emily Stier Adler is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Rhode Island College. She continues to teach the Sociology of Aging and does research on a variety of topics including retirement and grandparenting. She and psychologist Michele Hoffnung are the authors of *Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents Share Advice, Insights and Experiences* (2019) available in paperback and as an ebook.