

'The Farewell' Greets with Cultural, Emotional Exploration

Submitted by [JonHC](#) [1] on July 22, 2019 - 5:34am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – We all have those family stories that seem just so uniquely ours that it is hard to believe anyone could actually relate to them. Stories that, at the time, don't seem like anyone else would even understand. Lulu Wang proves in "The Farewell" that all it takes is a little empathy, a skilled storyteller, and a group of talented people to bring any story to life.

Based on a true story that is all "based on an actual lie," Lulu Wang artfully creates something that's less of an explanation and more of an exploration. It all begins when Billi (Awkwafina)—meant to represent Wang herself—discovers that her grandmother, AKA Nai Nai (Shuzhen Zhao), has a terminal illness. As if that information weren't distressing enough, Billi also finds out that her family plans to hide the diagnosis from Nai Nai, and let her live the rest of her days in what they assume will be blissful ignorance. Devastated by both the news and her family's decision, she plans to go along with it when she decides to visit her family in China for a rushed wedding that they're putting together as a front for getting the entire family to spend one last great moment with Nai Nai.



Photo credit: A24

I couldn't possibly do justice in explaining the amount of beauty that radiates from this film. It exists in the framing of every scene, in the interactions between characters, in the copious amounts of comfort food, in the meaningful silences, and even within the mournful sadness throughout. Wang doesn't tell her story as much as she forces us to experience it. Her character, Billi, is the emotional vehicle through which we explore this foreign-to-many world of duty and tradition, with her reactions perfectly mirroring our own. Her genuine and relatable reaction to everything she experiences transcends any sort of limitation you might think exists because of the specificity of location and culture. Although we may (hopefully) go our entire lives never having experienced something like what Wang and Billi went through, we are all the better for having witnessed them unfold.

Regardless of our own family life, "The Farewell" offers a story that provides everything necessary to understand and empathize with it. The bittersweet emotions are tempered with poignant moments that aren't afraid to just sit there in silence. The humor is organically sprinkled in even some of tensest moments, providing a momentary respite from the unbearable sadness while never betraying the thoughtfully crafted tone and pacing. Not only does the film earn our laughter and tears, but more importantly, it gains our respect and understanding. The emotional complexity in "The Farewell" is one of the layers available to all viewers, but there is a deeper dive for other Americans that also belong to two cultures.



Photo credit: A24

Growing up as a Mexican-American, I have often felt like an outsider to both cultures. I look too Mexican to be accepted as an American, while also being too steeped in American culture to be seen as Mexican. I grew up as a child of both worlds, but also never being able to comfortably take root in either. My skin kept me from feeling at home in America, while my accent and upbringing were always a source of ridicule whenever I would go visit my family in Mexico. "The Farewell" does a spectacular job at exploring this cultural disconnect, and how the values of one are devalued by the other. This tale of two Billi's perfectly captures the feelings I have, and continue to have, with regards to my dual-heritage, and takes it further than that. There are revelations to be had in this film that ended up defining feelings I couldn't even put into words, let alone come to terms with. While there aren't any happy endings or finite answers to be found, I did leave with a sense of catharsis I wasn't even aware that I was starved for.

Wang assembles an incredible, all-Asian cast that proves to be integral in the effectiveness of this character-driven story, with a truly standout performance from Awkwafina. There is no way to describe Awkwafina's career-defining, nuanced performance without it being an understatement. Up to this point, she has mostly been known to movie-goers as the eccentric comic relief, and to some rap-aficionados as the "My Vag" singer. As Billi, she brings an understanding and maturity to her character that finally showcases her full range of ability. The sincerity and subtlety Awkwafina displays is a perfect reflection of the film itself.

"The Farewell" opened in Chicago on July 19th. Featuring Awkwafina, Tzi Ma, Diana Lin, Shuzhen Zhao, Han Chen, Jim Liu, and Hong Lu. Directed by Lulu Wang. Written by Lulu Wang. Rated "PG"



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