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The Farewell (PG)

Dir: Lulu Wang

With: Shuzhen Zhao, Awkwafina, X Mayo

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Synopsis: writer Billi is very close to Nai Nai, her grandmother. She learns from her parents that Nai Nai is terminally ill, but the family decides to follow tradition and keep it a secret from Nai Nai. A final get-together at a family wedding is arranged but Billi and the family soon fall out over keeping the truth from Nai Nai. Relationships become strained by the need to maintain the deception but it holds together long enough for the wedding ceremony to pass off successfully. Members of the family then go their separate ways with Nai Nai still unaware of her true condition.

Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* is based on a true story – or, as an opening title card has it, “a real lie”. When Wang's paternal grandmother was diagnosed with terminal cancer and given only six months to live, her family decided to follow Chinese norms and not let her know. The reasoning was twofold: that the anxiety of knowing about a diagnosis can kill faster than the cancer itself, and that shouldering responsibility collectively as a family to spare an individual needless pain is the right thing to do. Wang, who was born in China before moving to the US at the age of six, first told the story as a segment on the radio programme *This American Life* and stages it for her second feature. (It remains decidedly a family affair: Wang's great aunt Lu Hong appears as herself.)

The writer-director's on-screen avatar is Billi (Awkwafina), a first generation Chinese immigrant – in this case a struggling writer with an improbably large Brooklyn apartment. Little time is wasted getting Billi and her family over to Changchung, China, where most of *The Farewell* unfolds. The primary subject is culture-clash anxiety: a Chinese native who hasn't returned home in a long time, Billi has fears about integrating back into the family group, where her status as someone more ‘American’ than Chinese and her shaky grasp of Mandarin inevitably set her apart. Benefiting from the novelty of being an American independent film shot on location in China, *The Farewell* anchors itself in its star's rightly acclaimed performance. Exposed to shocks and surprises big and small, Billi internalises most (but not all) of her anxiety, and Awkwafina avoids overplaying any of her reactions, instead seeming credibly on edge – and perpetually unsure about how much of that to let out – throughout.

When Billi wonders if it's unethical to deceive her grandmother (Zhao Shuzhen), her uncle Haibin (Jiang Yongbo) responds that such thinking marks her as the product of Western individualism as opposed to Chinese ideals of collective responsibility. Yet this



fraught territory – the construction of first-generation identity in an ever-expanding diaspora – only really crackles in one scene, a family banquet at a restaurant. With the camera planted on a revolving lazy Susan, a family whose members are spread out between China, the US and Japan argue about their parental and cultural values, the view slowly resetting itself to take in repeatedly shuffled configurations of combatants in an adroit use of widescreen staging. Those who have sent their children away from China for higher education are alternately on the offensive and the defensive; the sense of a family unavoidably stratified along different ideological lines is palpable.

Generally, however, *The Farewell* is a low-impact experience, in part by design. Averse to purposeful discomfort, Wang avoids the imposition of dramatic third – act reveals or showily cathartic confrontations, but there's still a sense of plodding through routine structure, in which every character serves a clear function, raising a point of conflict at regular intervals until all the strands have been resolved. It's strange to watch a film whose charged premise is rendered so frictionless. If Awkwafina's performance is admirably free of pathos, the movie around her is softening the blows at every opportunity.

Credits

Billi	Awkwafina
Haiyan	Tzi Ma
Lu Jian	Diana Lin
Nai Nai	Zhao Shuzhen
Little Nai Nai	Lu Hong
Uncle Haibin	Jiang Yongbo
Hao Hao	Chen Han
Aiko	Aoi Mizuhara
Gu Gu	Zhang Jing
Mr Li	Yang Xuejian
Director	Lulu Wang
Screenplay	Lulu Wang
Director of photography	Anna Franquesa-Solano
Editor	Michael Taylr, Matthew Friedman
Music	Alex Westom

USA 2019. 100m

Another View

The push and pull between the bonds of blood and the ties of culture are explored with a light touch and a perceptive eye for detail in this delightful, semi-autobiographical family drama from writer and director Lulu Wang. Chinese American Billi (Awkwafina, building on her zesty comic turn in *Crazy Rich Asians*) has a foot in each of the two countries. Wang introduces the idea with the same deft writing and wry insight that characterise the film in its entirety. Billi walks through the streets of New York talking on the phone in the respectful Chinese of a dutiful granddaughter to her beloved Nai Nai (Zhao Shuzhen). “Yes, I’m wearing a hat,” she reassures Nai Nai (she isn’t). Then she effortlessly switches personas and languages to banter in American-accented English with a canvasser on the street.

The American tendency to freely share thoughts and feelings collides with the Chinese way of parcelling up emotions. The two identities co-exist in Billi, until the moment that she learns that Nai Nai has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and that her family have decided to keep the information from the elderly lady. “Chinese people have a saying: when people get cancer, they die,” says Billi’s mother (Diana Lin). “But it’s not the cancer that kills them, it’s the fear.” Billi disagrees, arguing that Nai Nai should have the chance to confront her fate.

A hastily convened wedding provides the cover story to bring the extended family back to China to bid farewell to their unwitting matriarch. Cut-away shots of the shellshocked happy couple, Billi’s cousin and his Japanese girlfriend, steamrollered into marriage after three months of diffident dating, are among the many sly comic asides that punctuate this poignant story.

As gifted a writer as she is at creating playful, visually layered frames, Wang is constantly juggling clashes – of cultures, of tragedy and joy. I particularly loved a heart-to-heart conversation between Billi and Nai Nai, which plays out against the backdrop of the soon-to-be married couple posing for wedding pictures wearing panicked, firing-squad grimaces. Ultimately, it’s all about balance, a yin and yang of roots and identities, humour and pathos that comes together into a satisfying, bittersweet wedding banquet of a movie.

Wendy Ide: The Guardian

That’s all (for now), folks! Thank you for supporting the Society during its summer season. We’re pleased to say that we will be returning to The Venue in September for a new programme.

The first part of the season will start on September 13th and run every two weeks until December 6th. Part two will start on January 10th with the first of 7 more films, and end on April 4th .

Membership for the new season will open on July 1st and stay open throughout the summer. We’re delighted to say that we’ve been able to keep the membership fee to a very reasonable £36, meaning Society films are still the best value cinema in Lincoln.

Details of the first 7 films are below, in alphabetical order

Ama Gloria (France 2023): a charming coming of age film from France about the relationship between a young child & her nanny when the latter has to return to her native home in Cape Verde and distinguished by a superb central performance by child actor Louise Mauroy-Panzani

Io Capitano (Italy/Belgium/France 2023). This epic story is the journey of 2 16 year old Senegalese boys to Italy, surviving ordeal after ordeal (including theft, torture & slavery) till they reach safety. Spectacular photography and excitement galore make this a genuine cinema experience.

La Chimera (Italy 2023): A British archaeologist becomes embroiled in the theft of historical Etruscan treasures across the Tuscan countryside in this 1980s-set eccentric Italian crime drama, directed by Alice Rohrwacher (*Happy as Lazzaro*).

L’Innocent (France 2022): Combining heist movie, family farce, and romantic comedy, this lively caper film examines the things we do for love. With Louis Garrel, Roschdy Zem and Noémie Merlant

Monster (Japan 2023): Kore-eda Hirokazu’s new film is a beautifully made humanist drama about a primary school boy whose behaviour causes concern to his mother. This is a complex and absorbing film that marks a return to form for this Japanese modern master.

Perfect Days (Japan 2023): Wim Wenders’ story is of Hirayama who works as a toilet cleaner in Tokyo. Content with his life and structured routine, he cherishes music on cassette tapes, reads books and takes photos. Through unexpected encounters, he reflects on finding beauty in the world.

That They May Face the Rising Sun (UK/Ireland 2023): a beautifully filmed and acted rural drama of the lives of two artists and the relationship they have with their neighbours. It’s set in Galway in the 1980s. It’s slow but full of character, humour, & superb cinematography.

The final running order is still being decided and is subject to the availability of all titles and confirmation of their booking. We’ll notify members of those details as soon as possible.