



1-30-2019

The Farewell

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2019) "The Farewell," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol23/iss1/20>

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Farewell* (2019) directed by Lulu Wang.

Keywords

Death, Chinese religion

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



The Farewell (2019), dir. Lulu Wang

Billi (Awkwafina) is a struggling writer living in New York City who talks to her grandmother in China every day. She has not visited China for many years. But when she learns that her grandmother, “Nai Nai,” has a terminal lung cancer diagnosis, she feels the need to return and see her once more.

The funny thing is, no one has told Nai Nai. In China, doctors will and can legally cooperate with families who wish to conceal a diagnosis from a relative. Although the doctors have given Nai Nai just three months to live, the family agrees not to tell her. Instead, they urge a cousin to get married quickly so that they all have an excuse to visit her in China.

Director Lulu Wang also wrote the screenplay, based on a true story about her own family. She told the story to *This American Life* (included in Episode 585, “In Defense of Ignorance,” April 22, 2016), and this prompted her to make a film of the story. The result is a hilarious yet poignant portrayal of the ways in which one Chinese family approaches death. While from an

American point of view, Nai Nai has the right to know (and Billi makes this case to the family repeatedly), from their Chinese perspective, as her uncle tells her, “Your life does not belong to you. You are part of a whole: a family, a society.” He says that others have to bear the burden of the sadness for Nai Nai; it is their responsibility, not hers, from a communal point of view. And Nai Nai did the same for her late husband, as she chose not to tell him he was dying until close to the end.

But Nai Nai thinks she is just fine, energetically doing Tai Chi and joining in the wedding planning. While the others must deal with their own feelings about her impending death, she can simply enjoy herself. Much of the humor of the film comes from this contrast, and much of the poignancy from the restrained way in which the family must mourn the loss of Nai Nai even while she is still with them. At one point, the family visits the grave of Nai Nai’s husband, and she asks his blessing on the wedding and the lives of her family. They bring food to him, in accordance with Chinese religious custom, opening the packages for him and sharing in it. When one brother offers cigarettes, Nai Nai says that he gave that up, and the brother replies, “How can it hurt him now?” Scenes like this convey the ordinary ways in which the worlds of the living and the dead mingle, as they speak as if he were alive even while they realize he is not. As part of the family, the dead are never really gone, and this is understood well by all of them.

Close to the end of the film, we hear the lyrics of Leonard Cohen’s “Come Healing” sung, including these: “Behold the gates of mercy, in arbitrary space, and none of us deserving the cruelty or the grace ... O see the darkness yielding that tore the light apart, Come healing of the reason, Come healing of the heart.” Even though Nai Nai doesn’t know it, the family engages in a ritual of healing as they face the fact of her death, offering an experience of grace to all of them. They leave healed, even while Nai Nai lives.

The coda to the film tells us that the real Nai Nai is still alive six years later; this reminds us of the irony that terminal diagnoses can be inaccurate, but we will all have to die at some point, and we need some tools to deal with this fact. Although Nai Nai is still very much with them, they have been given the gift of facing mortality with the support of a family and a belief system that keeps the departed connected to them. It's a beautiful reminder of the gifts of life and love that are always in our midst.