“The Farewell” Takes on Culture, Cancer and the Long Goodbye

Director Lulu Wang’s new film turns a real-life lie about death into a family hit.

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A new film about cancer, loss and family goodbyes has wooed critics and audiences alike with its smart cross-cultural commentary and keen invitation to audiences to reflect on the passing of relatives close to them. A recent article in Rolling Stone explained the film’s backstory.

The Farewell––a breakout hit at this year’s Sundance festival—tells the story of a Chinese-American woman named Billi (played by actress Awkwafina) who learns her grandmother is dying of cancer but is forced to keep it a secret. The reason, her family explains, is in order not to ruin what she has left of her life. The family eventually conspires to stage a fake wedding celebration in China to bring everyone together to say goodbye, and the once-small lie snowballs into an elaborate deception.

In fact, the director of the film, Lulu Wang, has told this family story before, on NPR’s podcast This American Life. That episode of the podcast provided the impetus for the film. In the episode, Wang explains the Chinese custom of shielding relatives from knowledge of an illness. The hope is that not telling a loved one that he or she is dying will help prolong his or her life and lead to happier final days.

The movie, which switches between bittersweet melancholy and witty comedy to tell its story is an indie hit that addresses how we grapple with the death of loved ones. It navigates the complex emotions that come into play when people become responsible for a family member’s end-of-life care and introduces American audiences to a facet of Chinese culture of which they might not be aware.

As for whether it’s a good idea to keep a family member’s cancer diagnosis from them—which many Western doctors do not recommend—viewers are left to decide for themselves. To learn more about the ethics of telling loved ones they are dying of cancer, click here.

For those interested in seeing the film, check out the film’s page on its production company’s site, A24.com, which has a trailer, synopsis and links to screening times near you.

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