

# The Narrative of Female Trauma in the American Chinese Film The Farewell

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## Abstract

The movie *The Farewell* takes Chinese family life as the mainline, and discusses cultural differences in a fake wedding. From the perspective of three representative women in the film --Billie, Grandma, and Billie's mother, this paper use trauma theory to analyze and interpret the typical characters in the film, adding a new dimension to the film interpretation. Cultural confusion and lack of affection in movies are the main causes of trauma. Deliberately avoiding the painful past, hysterical crying is the expression of trauma. The return of affection and white lies are the means to cure. Appreciating and understanding the movie theme again from the perspective of female trauma narrative can better understand the cross-cultural ways of getting along with Chinese families.

## Keywords

The Farewell; American Chinese Film; Trauma.

## 1. Introduction

*The Farewell* is a film produced by A24 Film Production Company, which tells the story of grandma suffering from cancer, family members choose to hide her illness, and family members who have lived abroad for a long time are ready to see grandma for the last time under the guise of Sun Zihao's wedding. Directed by Chinese director Wang Ziyi, the film won numerous awards at authoritative film festivals at home and abroad. The film shows a cultural conflict under a white lie. Usually, in the eyes of Chinese people, if a person has an incurable disease, people will hide his illness and accompany him through this last life journey. However, in the eyes of Bili's typical western culture, if you don't tell the patient's illness, it is inhuman behavior. The film started a tug-of-war in such a cultural conflict. At last, Billie and her family concealed her family's illness, and the film echoed China's traditional cultural thoughts. In this journey of seeking roots, in addition to the cultural conflicts highlighted in the films, the main female characters in several films also regain themselves through trauma and are on the road to healing. Trauma is the physical damage caused by external forces. In the field of psychology, it is the result of a disaster or accident, causing extensive physical and psychological harm to the victims in a period, which is repetitive and persistent. (Caruth, 59) Trauma is not simply confined to physical injuries but focuses on psychological injuries. The former is simple and maybe cured, while the latter is concealed, latent, and delayed. Erickson pointed out that trauma can come from "a series of life experiences, but it may also come from an unrelated event-from long-term exposure to danger or a sudden shock; From persistent abuse or attack; From a period of depression and regression or a shocking moment ". (Xin Wang, 1) There are many manifestations of trauma, such as numbness of movement, sensory loss, cramp, and amnesia. Since the 19th century, trauma theory has experienced a process of development and enrichment from physiology, psychology to social culture. How can trauma be shown in this movie? This can not be separated from the director's clever narration. Narration is to tell a story literally in a specific language. Narratology is used in literature, semiotics, and other fields, and developed into narratology, which studies the nature, form, narrative angle, narrator, narrative

content, narrative object, and narrative function of narrative works. By analogy, trauma narrative is a story about traumatic events. The scope of female trauma narration in this paper refers to a mechanism of telling trauma stories by the film. The film has become one of the most important and effective ways for directors to express their feelings. This film and television work, which focuses on family, provides a good platform for traumatic expression and traumatic experience. The film is one of the main forms and effective ways for writers to express their emotions, while the female traumatic narrative is a visual expression of traumatic experiences or events from the perspective of women, and becomes the main medium for recalling traumatic events and narrating personal traumatic experiences. Compared with literary works, movies have a complex narrative, and the unique perspectives of three generations of women in *The Farewell*, which support the narrative of movies, add a unique charm to movies. Women's traumatic story is an important part of new period literature. Female directors' description of trauma focuses on their own traumatic experiences and has a unique understanding of trauma psychology and emotions.

The research on *The Farewell's* film at home and abroad mainly focuses on the means of film shooting, the study of cultural identity, the study of cultural differences between China and the United States, and so on. In 2019, Donna Karimi introduced the film in *The World Of Chinese*. In *A Study on Collectivism and Individualism in the movie the Farewell* by Lulu Wang, Kandanaarachchi and Wijayabandar discussed the collectivism and individualism styles displayed in the movie. In 2020, the research of this film was published in a large number of papers. Liang Chao and Zhan Shuquan explained the identity of the characters in the film from the perspective of postmodernism in the article "In collision and transcendence: on the cultural reconciliation of Don't tell her". Lan Yuling took a different approach and discussed Bili's embarrassing situation as a cultural outsider from the perspective of "the other". Sun Qiang, from the Chinese root culture, meticulously added a new explanation to the film interpretation. There is little research on the field of trauma theory analysis. Through the causes, characterization, and healing process of the trauma of three generations of female characters in the film, I hope to add a new dimension to the interpretation of the film. *The Farewell* focuses on the Chinese-American theme, and the trauma memory in the characters is the epitome of the living situation of Chinese-American groups. Re-interpretation of the film text will help to better understand such realistic dilemma problems in Chinese-American films.

## 2. Causes of Trauma

No matter what kind of trauma narrative, the establishment of the trauma theme is the premise of the narrative. In the multidisciplinary study of trauma, Kathy Kalus, from the perspective of socioculturally, is an important research achievement in this field in her famous treatise *Trauma: Memory Inquiry and Silent Experience: Trauma, Narration, and History*. She points out that the characteristics of trauma are delayed, uncontrollable, and repetitive. Flashback, nightmares, and hallucinations are common manifestations of traumatic experiences. Psychological trauma and cultural trauma are the main categories of trauma. As a form of trauma expression, movies and television play an important role in reflecting memory and healing trauma. (Zhang Jinglei, 23) Contemporary film narrative theory generally divides the materials used to express the objects of film narrative into five categories: images, sounds, words, words, and music, which together constitute a visual narrative. Sometimes, a specific film element or several elements are used together to form the characterization and form a specific narrative way. (Shen Dan, 249) The film directed by Wang Ziyi tells what trauma and how these traumas affect the development of individuals and the promotion of the film, which is the focus to be discussed next.

First of all, the lack of affection is the main cause of psychological trauma. Psychological trauma is often related to disasters such as war, flood, earthquake, fire, and plane crash, but it is far more than that. Neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, or violence that may be experienced for a long time in daily life will contribute to the development of psychological trauma. The Farewell's picture is gray, giving people a sense of seriousness and coldness. The film starts with the background sound of the hospital and a beautiful Changbai Mountain landscape painting as the background. Music can make people think of where will you go in the hospital, which makes people guess and captures the audience's heart. As grandma walked in from the right side of the screen, there was a scene of grandma and granddaughter Billie making overseas phone calls. In the conversation scene between grandma and Billie, Billie heard the background sound of the hospital on the other end of the phone, and then stopped nervously to ask grandma what had happened. Grandma, as an elder, didn't let her granddaughter know about her illness. She was concerned about her granddaughter's safety all the time, telling her bad guys outside not to be robbed. This scene showed that grandma was deeply concerned about her granddaughter in America and wanted her granddaughter to be all right. Because Billie has been living abroad, Grandma's heart has been longing for Billie to "go home and see often", but Billie is also "hard to protect herself" in the United States, so she can only express her missing for her grandmother by phone with broken Chinese. In reality, due to the geographical gap between grandparents and grandchildren, family ties can only be kept in touch by overseas phone calls. Grandma's two sons, one is far away from the United States, the other is going to Japan to develop. The real tragedy of "children want to raise but relatives don't wait" is staged in such a family. As a mother, she can only pretend to be strong, hoping that all the children will be well. In the film narrative, the narrative of the "female perspective" is adopted from the camera perspective. Although there is no clear female voice in the film, such as narration, self-report and long shot, under the lens language, by giving grandma a lot of depth of field and close-up, the film portrays a woman who is eager to get family happiness in her old age, and she is about to have cancer, and the lack of affection and her illness is wordless wounds for her. (Li Xianjie, 6) As the backbone of a Chinese-American family, Billie's mother still has the inevitable troubles of her daughter-in-law in ordinary Chinese families. From the quarrel between Billie's mother and daughter, it is not difficult to know that part of the reason why Billie's family went away to their hometown to seek development is related to grandma. Mom said that when grandma and she were in the same room, she always felt the strength of grandma, and she didn't feel like a family here. The troubles of the traditional family overwhelmed her, and they left their homeland for better development. The irreconcilable conflict between relatives caused her to suffer psychological trauma. Bili, as the main core figure in the film, suffered more trauma. The successive departure of relatives has brought deeper trauma to Billie's heart. The English name of the film *The Farewell* means "Farewell", which is not only a farewell to grandma, but also a farewell to everything in the past. For her, all her emotional support in China seems to have left without saying goodbye. She didn't have her side when grandpa died. She didn't say goodbye to grandpa, so he left her. Grandma's leaving is the last straw in her heart. Billie can't bear to leave without saying goodbye. She suffered psychological trauma.

Secondly, confusion about one's own culture leads to cultural trauma. Geoffrey Alexander called it "cultural trauma", that is to say, the memory left by a group member after a terrible incident fundamentally changed their future identity. Erickson pointed out that trauma can come from "a series of life experiences, or from an unrelated event—that is, from prolonged exposure to danger or a sudden recurrence of fear." As Bili walked into grandma's house, the family stared at her dramatically, and this cultural farce officially kicked off. As a child of the second generation of Chinese immigrants, Billie moved away with her parents to live in the United States when she was very young. In the blending of different cultures, Billie faced more obvious

and prominent cultural conflicts. Since she set foot on the land of Changchun, Billie has been struggling with her own cultural identity. Being in both Chinese and Western cultures, she became the "middleman" of culture. This embarrassing situation made Billie at a loss, and the strangeness of this culture inevitably brought doubts to Billie. First of all, when the film shows Billie's cultural trauma, the dialogue and expression between Billie and the hotel waiter reflect this unspeakable cultural pain. When asked by the waiter whether China is good or America is good, Billie dodges her eyes, only smiles bitterly, and replies in broken Chinese: "It's different." When she first got off the plane, she was greeted warmly by a group of Chinese drivers, and Billie felt uncomfortable and resisted. She sat in a taxi, and the camera of the film flew by with her perspective. She looked at the strange rainbow bridge with a serious and gloomy expression. Secondly, the film shows Billie's confusion about lies. After learning about grandma's illness, the family's first reaction was not to tell grandma, which shocked Billie. The film first gives a close-up of Billie's stunned face, and then Billie refutes this kind of behavior. Isn't it illegal? Billie and Xiao Yan are cupping in the bath center. The film shows Billie again. She asks Chinese Xiao Yan why her family is hiding her illness. What if grandma wants to say "goodbye"? Grandma's illness worsened, and the whole family came to the hospital. At this time, the tone of the film became darker again, and the picture composition of the real scene in the hospital was even more depressing. Billie asked the doctor why Chinese people would rather hide their illness than tell patients the truth. The doctor explained that this was indeed a lie, but white lies were normal and reasonable in Chinese eyes. Finally, the film shows the confusion of Billie's cultural identity. There are two scenes in the film that are worth recalling: at a family dinner that should have spread with warmth, it turned into a farce with cultural conflicts everywhere. Billie felt indifferent when she saw it in her eyes. When the picture turned, she went back to the hotel to hear the noise in the mahjong room and leaned forward to spy on the scene in the room. At this time, the beautifully dressed hostess in the picture also looked at her at the same time, and both girls had unspeakable pain. If the hostess's confusion was lost in this colorful city. Billie is experiencing cupping, a health care project with oriental tradition. She takes off her coat in front of the mirror and sees her back covered with bruises of cupping, but her expression is cold and depressed. The function of cupping itself is a healthy way of keeping in good health. However, in Billie's confused face and the director's almost black picture, the traces of cupping are like cultural wounds that Billie can't understand.

### 3. Trauma Characterization

Herman's description of trauma representation in *Trauma and Recovery*: "Traumatic experience is not expressed in words, but the form of psychological symptoms." In the book *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* edited by Wang Qingsong and Tan Qingrong, it is said that severe traumatic events mainly refer to sudden and overwhelming threatening events or catastrophic factors, which can make people who have experienced or witnessed the events feel extremely scared, miserable, or helpless. It is also suggested that "traumatic events must be of sufficient intensity, often sudden and highly threatening, to arouse strong subjective experience of individuals, that is, traumatic experience. The main cause of psychological and mental trauma caused by sexual events is that it can not only make people experience the threat of personal safety or death but also disturb normal psychological function, causing fear, helplessness, panic, and anxiety. It also disturbs normal psychological function, causing fear, helplessness, panic, and anxiety, and psychological pain that may be unbearable. Although personal responses to trauma vary from strong to weak, from short to long, patients with post-traumatic stress disorder often hide traumatic scenes in their minds after traumatic events, and they are unwilling to bring them up again, turning them into unreachable but unforgettable memories. Three representative women in *The Farewell* experienced different trauma at different times, places, and scenes. Compared with the content of movies, storytelling is the most basic part.

The way the director chooses to describe trauma and the narrative structure of developing trauma memory. Memory is both "self" and "other", and traumatic memory has strong other humanity. The director's expression of trauma not only draws lessons from the memory of the victim but also introduces the audience's views different from those of the victim in the narrative process, to realize the multiple expression of trauma.

The injured characters created by the director have the following important characteristics: First, when they are hit by reality and recall past traumatic experiences, they often fall into a sad state. Grandma, as the core figure in the movie, her trauma comes from the lack of family affection and the torment of her illness, which makes her physically and mentally reflect the traces of trauma. Concealing the illness is not the first experience for this Chinese family. According to Xiao Yan's memories and oral audience, grandma also concealed the illness before grandpa died, and told him about his illness before he died. When Grandma was undergoing a CT examination, the film showed that Grandma was very lonely. She was wearing a hospital gown and coughed from time to time. After experiencing the deterioration of grandma's illness, my mother also started her memories. When her loved ones died, the film gave a close-up shot of Billie's mother. Billie's mother frowned and told Billie about all the pain she needed to support when her loved ones died. After the wedding, Billie's family will return to the United States. Before leaving, Grandma reluctantly bid farewell to Billie. Billie knows that this may be her last time with her. After these days of joys and sorrows, Billie can only hug her tightly, as if the tighter she hugs her, the more she won't leave. When the movie renders this scene, it draws a gray-blue tone on the screen, which sets off Bili's mood at this time is also very gloomy. Bili can't understand why patients don't have the right to know their illness in Chinese culture. On the eve of the wedding, Bili's mood reached its climax in the face of this culture, and she asked her mother hysterically in tears.

The second is to deliberately avoid painful memories, digest emotions, and gradually close yourself. If the care and love for Billie reflect her instinct to protect her elders as a grandmother, her care for her two sons reflects her unspeakable trauma. Two excellent songs have married and have enviable families. According to common sense, it should be the age when grandma enjoys family happiness. However, grandma still cares about her sons, and the children who don't go home for a long time become the pain in her heart. In the film, two sons are drinking at home. Facing his wife's accusations and exhortations, Grandma knows that drinking is not good for them, and still insists on taking out good white wine to accompany her son to drink. This inner anguish is the expression of her inner trauma. Grandma knew that she was old, and when her only grandson got married, she dragged her sick body to the wedding, trying to make everything perfect. Although the hotel promised to replace better dishes as compensation, she was still unhappy. She felt that this had destroyed her original intention and embarrassed her. Most importantly, she was afraid that the children would not be satisfied. As a typical elder in China, she always wants to leave the best for her children, and she is willing to bear all the hardships. Grandma worried about Billie's marriage and love. Billie didn't have a boyfriend. When Grandma was in critical condition, Grandma learned that the doctor who checked the room was a British student. Grandma wanted to marry her granddaughter and care about her children. After Billie knew that her grandmother's illness was getting worse, Billie played the piano mechanically or even angrily at her grandmother's home. Billie often played the piano when she was a child, and I don't know when she gave up such a hobby. Facing the helplessness of her grandmother's impending departure, she could only vent her emotions with the piano under the watchful eyes of her family.

Third, after experiencing traumatic memory, I lost my cultural orientation. As an immigrant of the Chinese generation and a daughter-in-law of China, Bi's mother is constantly avoiding contact with her Chinese mother-in-law. When asked why she didn't seek development in China that year, her mother was very impatient, saying that her grandmother always felt that she was

very strong, unlike the traditional daughter-in-law, which would bring a lot of trouble to her family, and her mother showed impatience and helplessness. Interestingly, when casting, A24 Production Company chose this actor whose previous film experience was unruly and difficult. I don't know whether the film production was intentional or not, so it chose such an actor with the typical stereotype. This may be deliberately shaping an "Eastern-style" relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which is also often the token source of traumatic relationships. As a Chinese immigrant, she has a sense of superiority that "American life is better than Chinese life". Even though Billie's mother is not rich in America, she is still trying to hide her embarrassment. On the eve of the wedding reception, grandma's family all came together for dinner. This scene is the most prominent contradiction in the movie. The scene where Billie's mother and aunt are at loggerheads at the dinner table can show that the two women have different arguments about their views. In the face of Xiao Yan's rendering of the freedom and freedom of Chinese life, Billie's mother did not agree. The real meaning of American life lies in freedom and the pursuit of the real meaning of life, rather than the idea of easily earning 1 million as Xiao Yan said. On the surface, both elders are praising their cultural environment. Xiao Yi's family has been longing for the life of their two brothers and wants to send their children "Bao Er" to the United States to study. Billie's mother's life in the United States is also a "marginalized" lifestyle. The exotic concept of American material wealth, the sincere response of returnees, and the objective reality of China's rapid development once again illustrate the contradiction and confusion of the comparative understanding of China and the United States. The description of trauma in Bili's mother's dual identity reflects that as it runs in the family person, she has been trying to find her own identity. Thus, an individual's traumatic experience, whether psychological trauma or cultural trauma, will leave an impression, thus becoming a painful memory, which is finally expressed appropriately.

#### 4. Wound Healing

The purpose of trauma narrative is not only to reveal the causes of trauma and its follow-up performance but more importantly, to find strategies to cure trauma. To recover from trauma, the injured person must face it and overcome it. (Tao Jiajun, 3) "The traumatized person recreates the traumatic experience from his point of view, expresses the injuries caused by trauma through a series of psychological states and behaviors, and tries to find effective ways to cure the trauma through vocalization. Personal trauma can be recovered by talking about it with others." Traumatized people begin to recall traumatic memories and talk about them. This kind of narration is helpful for the wounded to open their hearts, feel themselves, overcome their fear and pain, and has a good effect on the treatment of trauma. (Liu Yu 12)

First of all, the return of family affection and wordless love between family members is the best way to treat psychological trauma. The process of grandma's wound healing well reflects this feature. Grandma's wound healing also runs through the film all the time. Grandma treats her diseases in the hospital, which is the healing of physical wounds. When the children came back from abroad, the grandmother who was in the dark was still very happy under the guise of getting married. Besides, her granddaughter's unexpected return made her even more excited. Being happy with grandma and her family, such a good mental state, is a kind of relief for her family affection that has not been available for so many years. On the eve of the wedding, all the families went to worship grandpa, and grandma sent grief to the deceased grandpa to bless all her children's safety. Somehow, this is grandma's traditional way of worship to express her love for her family, which is a strong love for her family. At the wedding, grandma watched her grandson finally have a family, and everyone was on this special occasion, which was the happiest day for her as an elder. Mother's wound healing path is more intuitive than other characters in the film. She needs to make up for her missing and misunderstood affection. She



has been wandering for a long time and witnessed the reunion of this affection during her journey back to China. In the happy scene of the family, the intangible wound in her mother's heart is gradually healing. Although at the end of the film, her mother was very reluctant to part with her mother-in-law, she reconciled with her own cultural identity and her mother-in-law was about to leave, she didn't give up her mother-in-law, which showed that she put down this experience and her inherent prejudice. In the characterization of the role of Bi Li, the first half of the film is gloomy and gloomy, which also corresponds to her confusion and loss. She is nearly thirty years old, worried about her survival in the United States, lost the opportunity to apply for a scholarship, owed a large amount of rent, and a series of bad things overwhelmed her life. After returning to her grandmother's house, the film changed in the narrative, the background music became a cheerful violin sound, and Billie's face gradually became smiling. The audience can see that as long as Billie and Grandma appear in the picture at the same time, Billie must be close to Grandma, and the company between relatives is like the sun shining into the darkness of their hearts. To accommodate more people into the film's wide format, the film adopts depth of field in photography, and the excitement and noise of Chinese families can also make the audience outside the screen appreciate the value of this affection. When the crisis is over and the traumatized person returns to a stable life, the spiritual gap he urgently needs to fill is love and a sense of belonging. On this basis, he will have enough energy to realize a higher lifetime value.

Secondly, the true understanding of white lies is the antidote to cultural trauma. Only by breaking free from the bondage of groups can individuals face their emotions, language, and trauma treatment be supported by society and truly realized. The injured subject must face the fear brought by trauma and restore the integrity of the creative experience. Under this premise, if the injured subject can describe the trauma in the past tense, it indicates that the trauma has begun to heal. Chinese-style white lies were once an unspeakable pain for my mother. In the face of Billie's incomprehension of lies, the mother recalled the past and calmly told the children that where will you go didn't need to make a scene, and it was the best comfort for her loved ones to go through this last journey of her life peacefully. The healing of Billie's trauma is the most obvious in the film. The premise of overcoming trauma is to face the cruelty of trauma. If we bypass this step, the healing of trauma will be impossible. After the wedding reception, everyone took a family photo together and learned that Grandma's medical certificate was about to be sent to her hand. Billie suddenly became worried, and the camera of the film accurately captured her emotional changes. She suddenly left the group photo in front of everyone, ran frantically in the street, went to the hospital to find a nanny, and revised the medical certificate together after discussing it with the whole family to reassure Grandma. Before that, Billie didn't understand what she did at home. At this time, Billie helped her family to finish the last part of the big lie. This is Billie's recognition of Chinese lies, Billie's growth, and the healing of the wounds she brought herself. Grandma said to her, "Sometimes things in life are not all that you do, but how you do it." This eye-catching line gave Bili a shot in the arm. After returning to the United States, she remembered her grandmother's entrustment and decided to regain her confidence and set out again. She shouted in the streets of New York but alarmed the birds in Changchun trees. This parallel scene metaphor reflects that Bili will continue to step out of the thorns of life with her grandmother's wishes. If Billie lies for her family in this movie is the greatest cure, after experiencing cultural baptism, she vented her emotions, but deliberately hid her heart. She cleared and forgot the source of trauma, and at the same time went to the road of self-reconciliation.

## 5. Conclusion

"It is necessary to tie the bell to get rid of the bell", the formation, representation, and cure of trauma is a closed-loop process, which is also the road that trauma experience must experience and face directly. In *The Farewell's* Golden Globe Award for American TV movies of that year, as the best musical comedy film, *Billie's* starring Awkwafina won the best female leading role. In her acceptance speech, she also sincerely thanked the actor who played the role of grandma in the film-Zhao Shuzhen. In and out of the play, the sincerity of the feelings for grandma and granddaughter is the core of this film's success. When the audience thought that the film would end with the sadness of Grandma and Billie respectively, the director specially added eggs in the closing subtitles to tell the audience that Grandma had not left us yet. This ingenious arrangement made the audience pull away from the sad mood and instead think of the sincere affection in the film. *The Farewell* plays an infectious, empathic, and leading role. Through the perspective of these three generations of women, it shows the charm that other works can't match. For the bystanders, that is, the audience, appreciating the charm of this film is each audience's memory, which resonates with the plot or lens language in the film, thus being integrated with the traumatic experience of the characters in the film, and achieving the purpose of common participation together in the film. *The Farewell's* film, as an excellent work of Chinese-American films, shows the cause, representation, and healing process of personal trauma and family. The film pays attention to trauma and its exploration, not for mourning and cynicism, and certainly not for forgetting memories, but through the reappearance of trauma, people gradually heal, repair wounds, and rebuild beautiful and peaceful hearts, just like the beautiful and pure feelings between grandma and Billy, which is the truly beautiful feelings between people.

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