

Overview:

The Farewell is a 2019 movie created by Chinese-American director/writer/producer Lulu Wang. It is based on a true “good lie” that Wang’s family told her grandmother (who lives in China) after they learned she was diagnosed with cancer. In China, it’s common for doctors to first inform family members about a medical diagnosis, and the family members often decide to not tell their loved one if the prognosis is grim. These decisions are rooted in Confucianism, which considers the family, rather than the individual, as the basic unit of society. It is the family members who should bear the burden of decision-making and grief/worry, not the individual who has been diagnosed. Furthermore, Chinese culture often takes a holistic approach to medicine and disease by considering an individual’s emotional and mental wellbeing in addition to their physical health. Many believe that the depression following a negative diagnosis would cause their family member to become even sicker and inhibit their body’s ability to fight off the disease.

The Farewell essentially chronicles the conflicted emotions that Wang felt about her family’s decision to hide her grandmother’s (Nai Nai) diagnosis, as she spent most of her life in the United States, where the individual—not the family—is the basic unit of society.

In this activity, participants will either watch *The Farewell* or listen to the *This American Life* episode where Wang describes this experience with her family. Then, the facilitator will lead a discussion about the internal and interpersonal conflicts that Lulu (Billi in the movie) faces as a result of the cultural differences within the family. Then, they will ask participants to reflect on the cultural dynamics within their own families.

Note: Some participants, especially if they are from Western cultures, may be resistant to the cultural practices and values presented in this film. Before beginning this activity, the facilitator may want to discuss the purpose of this assignment, which is not to evaluate whether the situation is “right” or “wrong,” but to reflect on cultural dynamics within families and how to negotiate cultural differences.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Analyze how families negotiate and bridge cultural differences.
2. Reflect on cultural dynamics/conflicts within their own families.

Time:

2 hours and 30 minutes

Group Size:

Entire group

Materials:

The film (available on Amazon Prime) or the [podcast episode](#), Internet access, a computer tablet, a projector/speakers, paper, pens/pencils.

Note: The *This American Life* episode includes interviews with several of Wang’s family members, so if facilitators would like to include these perspectives into the activity, they may choose the podcast over the film.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Openness:

- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Other Skills:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Emotional Resilience

Activity Instructions:

1. Either watch *The Farewell* or listen to the *This American Life* episode featuring Lulu Wang. You may choose to ask participants to watch or listen ahead of time, or they watch/listen as a group. Tell participants that the point of this activity is to discuss cultural difference and cultural dynamics within families, not to evaluate whether the situation is “right” or “wrong.”
2. Lead participants in a discussion using the following questions:
 - Why was Billi (or Lulu if using the podcast) conflicted about the family’s decision to not tell Nai Nai about her diagnosis?
 - What are some of the differences between Billi (or Lulu) and her family members? What about similarities?
 - How did Billi (or Lulu) negotiate and bridge difference with her family members?
 - What did Billi (Lulu) learn about herself after this experience? What about her family?
3. Ensure that each participant has a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Ask them to write about a time when they disagreed with or were confused/uneasy about a family decision, tradition, or practice. The facilitator may choose to provide an example from their own family to help participants come up with ideas. As they are writing, they should consider the following questions:
 - Why did/do you disagree with your family’s decision, tradition, or practice?
 - How might cultural values/differences come into play with your disagreement?
Note: The facilitator may need to remind participants that culture is not just concerned with nationality, ethnicity, or race. Cultural differences may also occur because of age, gender, socioeconomic status, regional location, etc.
 - How did you negotiate this disagreement with your family members?
 - How is your family similar/different to the family in the film/podcast?

4. Ask if any participants would like to share what they wrote. Then, end the activity by debriefing with the following questions:
 - How did you feel during and after watching the movie (or listening to the podcast)? While writing about your own family? Why do you think you felt this way?
 - Can you identify any similarities between your family and the family in the film/podcast? What about differences?
 - As you listened to other participants' experiences with their families, did you notice any similarities with your experiences? What about differences?
 - How will you apply what you learned to future conversations/interactions with your family?

Related Tools:

Tools to use in conjunction with this activity:

- [Cross-Cultural Values](#)
- [High and Low Context](#)
- [Hofstede Value Dimensions Online Country Comparison Tool](#)
- [Human Values Continuum](#)
- [Individualist-Collectivist Quiz](#)
- [Self-Awareness and Core Cultural Values](#)