

# WIDESHOT



## **Werner Herzog Masterclass**

Why we consider it "The perfect course for DIY filmmakers."

## **The True Story Behind 'The Farewell'**

Interview with Lulu Wang on her debut film starring Awkwafina.

## **'Guava Island' Behind the Scenes**

Meet the Cuban talent musical starring Childish Gambino.

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**[AD]**

A portrait of Lulu Wang, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a dark blue button-up jacket over a white shirt. She is looking slightly to the right with a gentle expression. The background is a solid light blue.

# 别告诉她 **THE FAREWELL**

## ***Lulu Wang's Truth, Lies, and the Long Goodbye***

***By David Fear***

**Lulu Wang** was in Berlin in 2013, editing her first film, when she got the call: Her grandmother in China, who'd briefly taken her in when her parents fled the country in 1989, was terminally ill. The family, however, told "Nai Nai" that she was just fine, that the doctor had given her a clean bill of health. Then Wang's relatives fast-tracked a cousin's planned wedding as an excuse for everyone to visit the elderly matriarch one last time. The only caveat: Nobody could tell Nai Nai the truth.

"Even as I'm going through all of this shock and the sorrow, the grief and confusion," the writer-director says, recalling the visit years later, "I had the feeling that: This is a movie. The whole atmosphere of the trip, the wild way we were keeping this story up ... I wasn't sure how I was going to turn it into a film. But I could just tell there was something really rich there."

The Farewell, Wang's dramedy about her experience, turns her misadventure into a funny, bittersweet story about a Chinese-American woman named Billi (Crazy Rich Asians' Awkwafina) caught between maintaining a shiny, happy deception and the painful process of saying goodbye to a loved one. The breakout hit of this year's Sundance festival — after a bidding war, it was



picked up for a reported \$7 million by A24 — the movie has left jaded press corps in tears and generated serious awards chatter for its star. And after opening in New York and Los Angeles last weekend, it had, according to *Variety*, the best per-screen average of 2019 to date. It's already been dubbed a bona fide "indie blockbuster" success, and it doesn't even go into national release until August 2nd.

But it's the surprisingly unsentimental mix of personal storytelling and universal, culture-clash dynamics that's made *The Farewell* stand out — the melding of the familiar and the specific, the accessible and the art-house aestheticized, that comes from a singular voice. There's a version of this movie in some alternate universe where the laughs are broad, your heartstrings are constantly under attack, everyone learns a life lesson, and you're left with the recognizable taste of saccharine in your mouth. Spend more than a few minutes in Wang's company, and you realize that she has zero interest in anything even close to pandering. "I do think that when you hear 'Chinese family drama-comedy,' you immediately get a sense of what that is supposed to be," she says. "And that feels very limiting, at least for me. Not just limiting as a filmmaker — like limiting as a human being."

When Wang first started pitching what would become *The Farewell* to producers, it was that type of film — what the director calls "My Big Fat Chinese Family Wedding" — that they expected to sign on for. "That was they wanted out of this," she admits. "Yeah, it's great that you have this premise and that the grandmother is dying. But: What if the main character is the bride, she breaks up with her white boyfriend, they have to get married to keep this lie to Grandma going, and then guess who falls back in love, and...."

*Awkwafina, left, and  
Lulu Wang, right, on  
the set of 'The Farewell.'*



**“The whole purpose of the lie was to bring joy. So making this film became part of the lie. It brought joy to all of us.”**



*Lulu cast Awkwafina because of their similar multi-cultural upbringing and their respective relationships with their grandmothers.*

“It’s like, I see the film you’re envisioning — because that film already exists!” Wang adds. “Like, a million times over! And that’s not the story I want to tell or the movie I want to make. I said ‘no’ a lot.”

Wang already had one film under her belt — her 2014 debut *Posthumous* — which, by her own admission, hadn’t quite turned out the way she’d hoped. The experience allowed Wang to prove to herself that she had the chops, initiative, and know-how to make a movie if she wanted to. It also helped get her parents off her back regarding her decision to give up being a concert pianist or going to law school in favor of a life behind the camera. (“After that, it was, ‘You did this once already and you’re so young — Ang Lee didn’t make his first movie until he was in his thirties and he was supported by his wife....’ That was always their reference point.”) But Wang didn’t relish the idea of repeating that disappointment or selling out. She decided to write out the tale of deceiving her grandmother as a short story. Maybe she could get it published in *The New Yorker*, she thought. A few other ideas for potential sophomore projects started to take shape here and there. And then *This American Life* came calling.

After Wang’s short film “Touch” played a few festivals, she found herself talking to the radio show’s producer, Neil Drumming. He’d seen her movie, loved her voice, was interested in working with her on something. Did she have anything else on deck? Well, she remembers telling him, there was this one thing about my grandmother.... Soon, she was recording “In Defense of Ignorance,” the 2016 TAL episode that features Wang recounting the tale of her family’s little white lie, complete with parental interviews and phone calls in Mandarin. It was











a brilliant combo of audio theater and investigative journalism. It was, in her words, “an oasis in the middle of all of the Hollywood nonsense.” It was on the air within a month.

“I remember sitting in New York in their studio, having a glass of whiskey and doing it in one take,” she says. “And then I met a friend from college for dinner right after and I just started crying. He asked, ‘You just did this amazing thing, so why are you upset?’ And I just said, ‘I don’t know if I’m ever going to feel like this making films now.’ There was such a purity to it and I felt such power as a storyteller that I thought, maybe I should quit the film business and just work for these guys.” Then the story aired, and everything changed.

There’s a second part to this anecdote, Wang points out with a smile, one that she swears is 100-percent authentic. “Right after I found out I had gotten in to Sundance,” she notes, “I was with my same friend at the same restaurant. He goes, ‘Hey, do you remember when we had that conversation here, and you said you’d never feel this creatively satisfied again? Now that you’ve made this film, do you still feel like you want to quit?’ And I told him no, making *The Farewell* — that was what exactly I’d been looking for.”

*The ensemble cast of the film; Yongbo Jiang, Aoi Mizuhara, Han Chen, Tzi Ma, Awkwafina, Xiang Li, Hong Lu, and Diana Lin. Hong Lu is also the real-life aunt of Lulu Wang.*

**The phones began to ring** soon after “In Defense of Ignorance” first aired, all producers on the other end of the line, all of whom had heard the episode and believed there was a movie there. Wang had been here before; she assumed most of the sit-downs would start off well before the inevitable “Yes, but what if...” shoe dropped. Still, when *About a Boy* director Chris Weitz asked to meet for coffee, she accepted. She also said yes when Peter Saraf, the cofounder of the production company Big Beach, proposed a let’s-get-to-know-each-other chat. Both of the encounters stick out in her mind, Wang says, because those were the only ones where “each of the producers respectively said, ‘We want to help you tell your story the way you want to tell it.’”

“I was like, ‘OK, but you realize that means this will be 75 percent in Mandarin,’” she recalls. “It will be an all-Asian cast, I want to shoot in my grandmother’s town, and my number one market is not the Chinese market — the minute we try to change it to fit both sides of the equation, we’re sunk.’ And they just said, ‘OK, we’ll try to aim for it being a Sundance film then.’ They knew what the sweet spot was.” Both Big Beach and Weitz’s production company Depth of Field ended up coming on board. A script began to make the rounds. Soon, Nora Lum, a.k.a. Awkwafina, was asking to audition.

“I think my reaction was, ‘The girl who did “My Vag” wants to read for this?!” Wang admits, referring to her star’s famous, foulmouthed YouTube rap. “She’d finished *Crazy Rich Asians* but it hadn’t come out. I don’t think she’d done *Ocean’s 8*. I just knew her music videos, because my brother was a fan. When they suggested her, the first thought I had was, ‘Guys, I thought we were on the same page here. No broad comedy!’”

## Callsheet & Specs

<b>Director</b>	Lulu Wang
<b>Writer</b>	Lulu Wang
<b>Starring</b>	Awkwafina Tzi Ma Zhao Shu-zhen
<b>Cinematography</b>	Anna Franquesa Solano
<b>Music</b>	Alex Weston
<b>Editors</b>	Michael Taylor Matthew Friedman
<b>Distribution</b>	A24
<b>Release Date</b>	July 12, 2019 (NA)
<b>Running Time</b>	100 Minutes
<b>Genre</b>	Comedy, Drama
<b>Country</b>	United States
<b>Language</b>	Mandarin English
<b>Budget</b>	\$3 million

[AD]

It turned out, however, that, like Wang, Lum had been partially raised by her Chinese grandmother. She understood the cultural balancing act of being viewed as primarily Chinese in America and primarily American in China. As she told *The Hollywood Reporter*, the fact that a script “which was then named *Nai Nai*, the Chinese word for grandmother, and was written by an Asian-American woman” had come across her radar was too unique to pass up. Wang told her she’d send her some scenes. Then Lum sent back a tape. “And when you saw how wonderfully raw she was, how she just sort of oozed Queens, it was like, ‘Oh, she could be the black sheep of this family, easily,’” Wang says. “Energetically, she wasn’t going to fit in with everybody else. That was the contrast we needed.”

When it came time to cast her parents, Wang chose Chinese-Australian actress Diana Lin to play her fictional mother and Hong Kong-born Tzi Ma, a prolific character actor who’s worked on everything from *Rush Hour* to *Arrival*, *L.A. Law* to *Silicon Valley* episodes, to play her dad. Her *Nai Nai* was played by 75-year-old veteran Chinese star Shuzhen Zhao. Her *Little Nai Nai*, Grandma’s younger sister, who first perpetrates the lie and coordinates the reunion, was played by Hong Lu — Wang’s actual great-aunt.

“Initially, I wanted her to play *Nai Nai*,” the director admits. “She couldn’t do that, so we decided to have her play herself. We kept asking ourselves, is it ethical to make her go through this traumatic experience again, take after take? And she kept asking us, ‘Why do you want me in your movie? I have a fat face and I’m going to ruin everything.’ Finally, one day I

sat my great-aunt down and said, ‘Listen, we all love you, but if this is going to be difficult for you emotionally....’ And she told me, “No, I have to do this. Who else can I talk to about this, Lulu? This is therapy to me.”

Hong became the *de facto* authority for her fellow performers on whether the interactions of the screen “family” felt like the real thing; she and Shuzhen began hanging out together off-set a lot and, according to Lulu, started calling each other “sister.” The director had made good on the promise to shoot *The Farewell* in her still-living grandmother’s hometown of Chungchun, ensuring that a high level of authenticity would be built in to the story. There was just one problem. Lulu’s very-much-alive grandmother still didn’t know about her cancer diagnosis. And the fact that her granddaughter was filming a movie almost literally in her backyard about this same falsehood required a good deal of obfuscation, distraction, and even more bending of the truth.

“We couldn’t tell her what the movie was about!” Wang says. “She knew it was about the family — that was obvious. Then she’d she ask, ‘But what about the family, what’s the story?’ And we’d go, ‘Oh, you know, us leaving for America, and coming back, and there’s a wedding, and culture clashes!’ ‘Oh, OK.’ All technically true. There’s just one tiny bit of information she’s not getting....” On the first day of shooting, *Nai Nai* wanted to bless the set, causing Lulu to run around and confiscate dozens of crew shirts bearing the production’s “*Nai Nai LLC*” logo. When they were filming Awkwafina’s tearful farewell to her screen grandmother, the real





grandmother came up to her after an emotional take and kept inquiring, “What’s wrong, why are you crying?” The star had to bite her tongue.

“Did I end up conscripting an entire film’s cast and crew into this lie? Is that the question? Yes, I did,” Wang says, laughing. “But there’s a line in the movie that ‘people don’t die of the cancer, they die of the fear.’ By making that movie, I’m bringing people, we’re cooking, we’re eating together. It’s bringing excitement to the

neighborhood, the city, my family. I got to share the American part of my life with my family in China and the Chinese part of my life with my colleagues.

“The whole purpose of the lie was to bring joy,” she adds. “So making this film became part of the lie. That was the most beautiful part of this. There was no fear while we were there. It added a good aspect to this story. It brought joy to all of us.” ■

*Billi (Awkwafina) and her family return to China under the guise of a fake wedding to stealthily say goodbye to their beloved matriarch (Zhao Shuzhen) – the only person that doesn’t know she only has a few weeks to live.*