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Intergenerational dynamics in Chinese diaspora: mother-daughter relationships in *The Farewell* (2019) and *American Girl* (2021)

Siyu Lu

Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

lulucia@ruri.waseda.jp

Abstract. This paper explores how mother-daughter relationships serve as central sites of cultural negotiation and emotional labor in Chinese diaspora families. Through close readings of *The Farewell* (2019) by Lulu Wang and *American Girl* (2021) by Feng-I Fiona Roan, the study examines how intergenerational tension, shaped by divergent migration experiences, reveals the complexities of diasporic identity formation. While *The Farewell* depicts a voluntary return to China that allows for gradual cultural reconnection, *American Girl* presents a forced return to Taiwan Province prompted by illness, where the mother-daughter relationship becomes strained by emotional volatility and dislocation. In both films, mothers act as cultural mediators, navigating inherited traditions and unfamiliar environments while managing their own vulnerabilities. Drawing on theories of hauntology, affect, and cultural mediation, this paper argues that mother-daughter bonds are shaped not only by familial roles but by structural histories of migration, generational memory, and emotional transmission. Rather than portraying cultural identity as fixed or inherited, these films show it as a process of reassembly shaped by displacement, return, and everyday acts of care. By centering affective dynamics within transnational families, the analysis contributes to interdisciplinary conversations in diaspora and film studies, offering insight into how they lived experience of migration is negotiated through intimate, often ambivalent, relationships.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora, mother-daughter relationship, affective transmission, reverse migration, cultural mediation, intergenerational conflict

1. Introduction

In recent years, diaspora studies have increasingly shifted toward examining the intimate, affective, and gendered dimensions of transnational life. Rather than focusing solely on economic migration patterns or assimilation metrics, scholars now foreground the everyday negotiations of identity, memory, and belonging within immigrant households. Within this framework, mother-daughter relationships offer a powerful site through which to interrogate the complexities of cultural transmission and affective work in diasporic contexts. These bonds are not simply private or sentimental; they are political, historically situated, and often burdened with the task of mediating between contradictory cultural expectations.

Chinese diaspora communities in the United States have long been shaped by uneven histories of exclusion, racialization, and transnational mobility. Since the mid-19th century, the category of "Chinese American" has encompassed immigrants and descendants from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, resulting in a complex and internally diverse community. The Chinese American identity has been repeatedly redefined across historical periods, from labor migration and exclusionary laws to professional and educational migration after the 1965 Immigration Act. These evolving trajectories have produced multilayered cultural identifications, as well as divergent generational perspectives on belonging, language, and family. Within such fractured and shifting conditions, the family—particularly the maternal figure—often becomes the primary carrier of cultural continuity, affective memory, and survival strategies.

This paper explores how mother-daughter relationships in two semi-autobiographical films, *The Farewell* (2019) by Lulu Wang and *American Girl* (2021) by Feng-I Fiona Roan, illuminate the emotional architectures of diasporic identity formation. Both directors, drawing from their own transnational upbringings, portray mothers not only as caregivers but as cultural mediators navigating illness, migration, and loss. The daughters, in turn, negotiate feelings of dislocation, resentment, and longing as they come of age in cultural in-betweenness. While *The Farewell* centers on a voluntary return to China framed as familial obligation, *American Girl* stages a forced return to Taiwan during crisis, generating more volatile intergenerational conflict.

Through a close reading of these films, this study investigates how memory, emotion, and power circulate across generations and across borders. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of hauntology [1], affective economies [2], and cultural mediation [3], the paper argues that these cinematic narratives do more than represent diasporic experience—they enact the affective labor of navigating it. By foregrounding the emotional contradictions embedded in transnational family life, the films offer critical insight into how diasporic subjects reconstitute identity through practices of care, resistance, and relational uncertainty.

2. Theoretical framework

In examining cultural adaptation and identity negotiation within Chinese American families, the mother-daughter relationship holds particular significance. Mothers frequently serve as key agents of cultural transmission, responsible for passing on language, values, and traditions while simultaneously navigating the demands of the host society. As Min Zhou observes in her study of Chinese immigrant women, these mothers often shoulder a "double burden" of paid labor and domestic responsibilities, a condition further intensified by limited English proficiency, lack of transferable skills, and their husbands' economic vulnerabilities [4]. Within this structural context, the maternal role extends beyond caregiving to encompass both cultural mediation and economic survival, making mothers central figures in sustaining familial stability and intergenerational continuity amid migration. This dual role places mother-daughter interactions at the center of intergenerational dynamics, offering a crucial lens through which to explore processes of cross-cultural adaptation and affective inheritance. These interactions are also saturated with layers of memory and unresolved history, which may silently shape the identities of second-generation daughters through moments of ambiguity, silence, or emotional distance.

The theoretical framework of hauntology provides a powerful interpretive tool for analyzing how such transgenerational cultural memory operates. Jacques Derrida conceptualized hauntology as a mode through which unresolved historical traumas and suppressed pasts return to shape the present as spectral presences [5]. Building on this, Grace M. Cho theorizes "transgenerational haunting" in the context of the Korean diaspora, arguing that familial secrets and silenced traumas circulate unconsciously across generations, producing enduring affective and epistemic consequences [6]. Applied to the Chinese diasporic context, this approach helps illuminate how historical ruptures, such as migration, political upheaval, cultural repression, continue to resonate within familial relationships, often in ways that are not directly articulated but deeply felt.

At the same time, the concept of affective production highlights how emotions are not merely private experiences but social and cultural practices formed through daily interaction [7]. Emotions circulate within the family as a kind of cultural capital, shaping and reshaping feelings of belonging, alienation, pride, and shame. Lisa Lowe, in her work on diasporic intimacy, further emphasizes that familial emotions are never purely personal but embedded in larger geopolitical and historical structures [8]. Within mother-daughter relationships, these emotions are continually produced, transmitted, and negotiated, influencing how each generation understands itself, the other, and their shared cultural location.

The mother's role as a cultural mediator adds another layer of complexity. Marjorie Faulstich Orellana describes how immigrant mothers frequently operate within "contact zones," social spaces where cultures clash, converge, and demand translation [9]. In such spaces, mothers mediate between the cultural expectations of their heritage and the institutional norms of their host society. When linguistic or institutional barriers limit their direct engagement with schools, medical systems, or bureaucracies, mothers often rely on their children, especially daughters, to act as language and culture brokers [10]. This dependency can place mothers in ambivalent positions: while their authority may appear undermined, they also play a central role in maintaining emotional coherence across generations. Rather than being trapped between tradition and assimilation, many immigrant women, as Nazli Kibria shows, deliberately uphold aspects of traditional family life because they find in them a source of moral structure, intergenerational obligation, and emotional support [11]. Their commitment to familial collectivism and parental authority reflects not resistance to change, but a conscious strategy of adaptation, which can nevertheless produce tensions when values and expectations diverge between generations.

By integrating the frameworks of hauntology, affective production, and cultural mediation, this study aims to deepen the analysis of mother-daughter dynamics in Chinese diasporic cinema. These theories not only offer tools for interpreting the visible and invisible tensions within immigrant families, but also sharpen our understanding of how memory, emotion, and power operate across generations in the shaping of diasporic identity under the conditions of globalization.

3. *The Farewell* (2019)

The Farewell (2019) tells the story of Billi, a Chinese-American woman who learns that her grandmother in China has been diagnosed with cancer. However, her family decides to keep the diagnosis a secret from the grandmother, staging a fake wedding as a reason for the family to gather in China one last time. Through Billi's perspective, the film explores her struggles between Eastern and Western cultural values and her reflections on family and cultural identity.

3.1. Dual cultural identity of first-generation immigrants

Although the primary narrative of The Farewell revolves around Billi and her grandmother, the mother-daughter relationship emerges as a central theme for negotiating cultural identity across generations. Billi's mother, a first-generation immigrant, plays a significant role in navigating these cultural tensions. Her relationship with Billi reflects the distinct challenges of cultural adaptation and identity formation that Chinese-American families often face.

In many affluent Chinese immigrant families in the United States, fathers tend to achieve high professional status and integrate more easily into American society, aligning themselves with the ideals of the "American Dream." This alignment often provides economic stability and social mobility, while mothers are more frequently responsible for emotional support and cultural transmission within the family, fostering strong emotional bonds with their children. This division of roles positions mothers as key cultural mediators—individuals who preserve family continuity while managing the expectations of both heritage and host cultures [12]. They often operate at the intersection of private and public life, maintaining traditional values within the home while adapting to external societal norms. However, in cross-cultural contexts, these maternal bonds can become complicated due to generational differences and language barriers.

In the film, Billi's parents are portrayed as a well-assimilated Chinese-American family. During a family gathering, it is mentioned that Billi's father, Haiyan, immigrated to the United States 25 years earlier. Both he and his wife are fluent in English, socially competent, and fully integrated into American society. This reflects the values of their generation, who deliberately chose to pursue the "American Dream" and, as a result, often exhibit a strong sense of identification with their adopted nationality. This is made clear when Haiyan affirms their American identity by referencing their U.S. citizenship. In a dinner scene, when Billi's grandmother insists, "No matter what, you should not speak badly of China; remember you are always Chinese," Haiyan replies, "We are actually Americans now; we hold American passports." In contrast, his brother, who has lived in Japan for over two decades, expresses a continued sense of Chinese ethnic belonging. This exchange captures the diversity of identification among first-generation immigrants.

Billi's mother, while socially integrated into American life, also embodies this dual identity in her parenting. She recounts how a church pastor allowed Billi to use the piano when the family could not afford lessons, highlighting her appreciation for American values of generosity and individual support. At the same time, she demonstrates strong attachment to traditional Chinese familial values. For instance, in an early scene, when helping Billi decide how many wontons to eat, she overrides Billi's suggestions and ultimately chooses the number herself. This act reflects both her nurturing nature and a subtle desire to assert parental authority. It also illustrates how she manages cultural norms through everyday decisions, functioning as what Orellana describes as a "contact zone" negotiator—someone who balances cultural expectations through small but meaningful gestures of care and discipline [13].

Despite her strained relationship with her mother-in-law, she returns to China without hesitation upon learning of her illness, motivated by Confucian ideals of filial piety and loyalty. She supports the family's decision to conceal the diagnosis in order to protect the grandmother from emotional distress. These choices reveal a complex psychological balance as she navigates competing American and Chinese values. Her actions demonstrate both the ambivalence and agency of first-generation immigrant mothers, who appear outwardly assimilated while continuing to uphold deeply internalized cultural beliefs.

Taken together, Billi's mother exemplifies the paradoxes faced by first-generation immigrant women who live between two cultural worlds. While they outwardly adapt to American life, they remain deeply committed to preserving a coherent Chinese moral framework. Her role is not only practical but also symbolic, as she becomes a figure through whom the tensions of diasporic life are constantly negotiated. This dual positionality significantly shapes Billi's cultural understanding, even when she resists or fails to fully comprehend her mother's intentions.

3.2. Cultural conflict within the mother-daughter relationship

This dual identity complicates the relationship between Billi and her mother, reflecting a tension between the mother's roles as both cultural guardian and social adapter. As a second-generation Chinese-American raised in the U.S., Billi feels a strong connection to American culture and values. Unlike her parents, who actively sought out and pursued the "American Dream," Billi does not feel the same pressure to validate her identity through assimilation or achievement. This creates a disconnect from traditional Chinese values and contributes to her internal struggle with cultural identification. This dissonance is further intensified by emotional undercurrents that remain largely unspoken, yet shape the relationship deeply. Billi's mother, while seldom expressing her own immigrant struggles, communicates expectations through silence and control. These nonverbal cues echo transgenerational haunting, where unresolved family histories persist through affective patterns rather than explicit memory [14].

This dissonance is further intensified by emotional undercurrents that remain largely unspoken yet deeply shape their relationship. Although Billi frequently argues with her mother, their bond remains close. For instance, in her grandmother's kitchen, Billi affectionately leans on her mother's back while she cooks. In contrast, Billi's interactions with her father are more

strained. In a bathhouse scene, her father awkwardly asks about her fellowship and finances, and Billi, seemingly impatient, responds with a simple "fine," lacking further engagement. These exchanges reflect traditional family dynamics, where mother-daughter relationships are often more emotionally expressive than father-daughter ones.

At the same time, Billi's mother holds conflicting expectations for her daughter. She encourages Billi to pursue her own path yet worries about her position in American society, a perspective shaped by her own immigrant experience. This contradiction surfaces in a family dinner scene, where Billi's aunt criticizes her views on money. When Billi replies, "Life isn't just about money," her mother intervenes, defending her choices while jokingly calling her a "losing stock." These tensions illustrate the emotional work of navigating between encouragement and anxiety. As Ahmed writes, in "affective economies," emotions circulate through family relationships and reflect cultural expectations [15]. In Billi's case, her bond with her mother involves not only love and disagreement, but also the emotional work of negotiating two cultural worlds.

This interplay of affection and critique continues in a conversation about Billi's childhood memories of China. Billi confesses her nostalgia for her time with her grandmother, lamenting that moving to the U.S. felt like "everyone was gone, and it was just the three of us." She describes feeling constantly confused and afraid, having been shielded from her family's struggles and denied the chance to grieve her grandfather's death.

These emotional disclosures reveal a deeper structure of unresolved loss and inherited confusion, which also reflects the kind of affective pattern of transgenerational haunting [16]. Billi's longing for connection and her mother's inability to fully respond reflect not only intergenerational misunderstanding but also the quiet transmission of unspoken histories. The mother's restrained parenting style can thus be seen as a form of cultural and emotional mediation, where the transmission of values is inseparable from the transmission of affect. Her self-restraint and measured care are not merely cultural habits, but affective strategies shaped by uncertainty, guilt, and historical dislocation. As Ahmed suggests, emotions adhere to people and practices, and in this case, they attach to motherhood itself [17].

Thus, *The Farewell* presents the mother-daughter relationship as a site of intergenerational negotiation, shaped by love, silence, and cultural dissonance. While Billi resists both American assimilation and Chinese traditionalism, her mother attempts to guide her through these competing worlds. The film ultimately reveals the fragility and resilience embedded in diasporic families, especially through the emotionally intense space between mother and daughter.

3.3. Language as a bridge and barrier

In *The Farewell*, language serves both as a bridge for communication and as a marker of generational and cultural divides. Billi's bilingualism allows her to participate in family life, yet also creates a subtle sense of distance, as she cannot express herself in Chinese with the same fluency or ease as in English. This gap often results in moments of confusion and emotional hesitation, reinforcing her uncertainty about cultural belonging.

Language takes on further complexity with Billi's mother. As Zhou notes, first-generation immigrants often use language to preserve cultural identity while adapting to a new environment [18]. For families like Billi's, who have achieved economic stability in the United States, language functions both as a means of maintaining cultural heritage and as a tool for integrating into mainstream society. Although Billi's mother uses Chinese to stay connected to her roots, she primarily communicates with Billi in English, even while they are in China. She often translates or rephrases Billi's words to help bridge cultural expectations, subtly mediating not just language but also emotion and intention. This ability to operate between two linguistic worlds underscores her role as a cultural translator, both literally and symbolically. Her ease in this role sharply contrasts with Billi's halting Chinese and sense of displacement, highlighting the generational and emotional gap between them.

In contrast to her interactions with her mother, Billi's conversations with her grandmother are shaped by linguistic limitations and emotional intimacy. Since her grandmother does not speak English, Billi must rely on her limited Chinese. This makes their communication more effortful but also more direct and emotionally resonant. As a result, her grandmother becomes a deeper link to cultural tradition, symbolically serving as a "spiritual mother" to Billi's Chinese identity. The reliance on Chinese in this relationship highlights not only the generational language gap but also Billi's dual dependence on language for both communication and identity formation. While her mother helps her navigate between American and Chinese cultural frameworks, Billi must interact with her grandmother more independently, deepening her emotional engagement with Chinese heritage.

The film's use of language also reflects Billi's internal tension between assimilation and belonging. In the U.S., she is confident and expressive, but in China, her limited fluency renders her hesitant and uncertain. When asked by the hotel staff whether she prefers China or the U.S., her awkward answer: "It's different", which she offers without elaboration, reveals her discomfort and ambivalence.

Language, in this sense, becomes a symbol of diasporic ambivalence. It is not only a tool for expression, but also a marker of identity and emotional vulnerability. This duality echoes a broader pattern seen in Chinese-American cinema. In *Alice Wu's Saving Face* (2004), for example, the mother and daughter insist on using different languages at home, with the mother speaking Chinese and the daughter English, reflecting generational divides in cultural identity. Similarly, in The Farewell, language exposes Billi's negotiation between her Chinese heritage and American upbringing, underscoring the emotional complexity of

her familial ties. Ultimately, Billi's evolving use of language mirrors her broader identity journey. Initially fearing that her grandparents' deaths would sever her connection to China, she comes to understand that cultural identity is not fixed. Rather, it is continuously negotiated across generations and geographies, suggesting that the differences between East and West can coexist within her.

While The Farewell unfolds within a framework of temporary return and emotional restraint, *American Girl* presents a sharply contrasting scenario. The film shifts the terrain from quiet reconciliation to volatile confrontation, as a young girl and her mother navigate reverse migration under far more disruptive circumstances.

4. *American Girl* (2021)

Written and directed by Feng-I Fiona Roan, *American Girl* is set against the backdrop of the 2003 SARS outbreak in Taiwan. The film follows Lily, who returns to Taipei from Los Angeles with her two daughters, Fang Yi and Fang An, after being diagnosed with breast cancer, ending five years of life in the United States. This reverse migration introduces a profound cultural rupture. Lily expects her daughters to quickly readjust to Taiwanese norms and routines, but the elder daughter, Fang Yi, finds herself alienated and resistant to the abrupt cultural shift.

As Lily copes with both her illness and the stress of reintegration, she assumes the dual role of caregiver and cultural gatekeeper, striving to preserve family harmony while reestablishing a sense of belonging. Her desire for the girls to reconnect with their homeland roots is met with tension and emotional resistance, particularly from Fang Yi, whose identity struggles form the emotional core of the film. Compared with *The Farewell*, which presents intergenerational tensions through emotional restraint and subtle gestures, *American Girl* foregrounds a more explicit and emotionally volatile negotiation between mother and daughter.

4.1. Maternal authority and cultural tension

The mother-daughter tension in *American Girl* is deeply rooted in the challenges of reverse migration. Unlike *The Farewell*, where the return to China is a temporary and voluntary journey of cultural reconnection, Lily and her daughters are compelled to return to Taiwan Province after five years in the United States due to her illness. This forced return triggers an emotionally charged process of cultural re-adjustment, particularly for Fang Yi, who finds herself disconnected from both the language and social norms of Taiwanese society.

Reverse migration introduces a specific kind of cultural disruption. Individuals who have partially adapted to one environment must reintegrate into another they no longer fully identify with. This tension is clearly embodied in Lily's parenting. Her expectations stem from an urgent need to restore a sense of order during a time of personal crisis. Lily's maternal authority becomes a residue of transgenerational haunting [19], where affectively charged silences and unprocessed trauma resurface in volatile ways across generations. Emotions in this context are not simply felt; they are interpreted, shaped, and sometimes distorted through the dynamics of care and control. Lily's strictness, while meant to protect, is registered by her daughter as rejection [20]. As she copes with illness, relocation, and the emotional burden of holding her family together, her parenting becomes a strategy for regaining control. She insists on Mandarin and adherence to Taiwanese norms to establish a sense of familiarity at home. Yet Fang Yi, shaped by a different cultural and emotional language, responds with resistance. Her inability to fit into the highly structured and exam-oriented Taiwanese school system leads to frustration. Mocked by her peers as the "American Girl," she becomes marked as both different and distant, which intensifies the cultural dislocation and emotional conflict between mother and daughter. Lily's cultural insistence, though intended to rebuild stability, inadvertently deepens the emotional rift between her and her daughter. Her parenting becomes a form of affective labor. She manages Fang Yi's behavior while concealing her own anxiety about her declining health, their fragmented family life, and her struggle to reclaim a coherent maternal role. Lily's repeated attempts to correct Fang Yi reflect both a sense of responsibility and her unease in a family environment that no longer feels stable or familiar.

Like the mother in *The Farewell*, Lily also serves as a cultural bridge between generations. However, unlike Billi's mother, who is able to guide her daughter from a position of relative stability, Lily herself is still in the process of readjusting to a homeland that has become unfamiliar to her. She must simultaneously renegotiate her own place in Taiwan's society while helping her daughters navigate a cultural environment they barely recognize. This dual pressure makes her role as a cultural mediator fragile and reactive rather than secure and supportive. At the same time, Fang Yi, due to her young age and limited cultural flexibility, reacts to the new environment with resistance and confusion. The vulnerabilities of both mother and daughter become entangled, making the work of cultural mediation even more difficult. The emotional core of the film lies in this imbalance: while Lily attempts to anchor the family through familiar traditions, Fang Yi experiences those same traditions as barriers to self-expression and belonging.

4.2. Emotional volatility and intergenerational conflict

The film portrays a relationship characterized by intense emotions—both profound love and significant conflict. As Lily's illness worsens and the pressures of reverse migration intensify, Fang Yi becomes increasingly frustrated. She is overwhelmed by her mother's pessimism and her own inability to regain control over a disrupted life. School stress, cultural alienation, and unspoken expectations converge, leading to frequent outbursts. Their interactions are marked by shouting, silence, and emotional withdrawal. These responses reflect their shared difficulty in processing uncertainty, fear, and grief.

The emotional tension reaches a climax when Fang Yi posts a blog titled "I Hate My Mother." While the post may appear impulsive, it reveals the depth of her emotional struggle. When her teacher comments that "sometimes, love and hate are two sides of the same coin," the film articulates the contradiction at the center of their bond. Lily tries to protect, but she also imposes. Fang Yi yearns for comfort, yet resists control.

Despite her strictness, Lily expresses care through small but significant acts. At a parent-teacher meeting, she defends her daughter by saying, "If my daughter needs good grades to have friends, then I'd rather she has none." She also takes her daughters to American-style restaurants in an effort to rekindle memories from their previous life abroad. These moments, although loving in intention, are often clouded by emotional tension and go unrecognized by Fang Yi.

In *American Girl*, mothering becomes entangled with emotional strain. Lily's words often reflect not just irritation, but also the weight of worry about her family's cohesion, her declining health, and her role within a home changed by absence. Fang Yi's anger stems not simply from adolescence, but from a deeper unease triggered by uprooted routines, bodily vulnerability, and a world that no longer feels coherent. Eventually, the emotional strain gives way to a quiet moment of vulnerability. After a particularly painful confrontation, Fang Yi asks her mother not to leave her. This request does not resolve their conflict, but it opens a space for recognition. Their relationship remains tense, but the film suggests that emotional connection can still emerge through moments of shared fragility. In diasporic families, intimacy often grows not from harmony, but from the labor of navigating pain together.

4.3. Reframing memory and emotional inheritance

In *American Girl*, America represents more than a physical location. For Fang Yi, it becomes a symbolic refuge and an emotional space where she imagines comfort, freedom, and a sense of belonging. Her question, "Can we go back to the States when you get better?" reveals that America functions as a form of spiritual escape. She associates it with warmth, clarity, and a happier past, especially in contrast to the confusion and alienation she feels in Taiwan. Her longing is not merely geographical, but rather reflects a desire to regain a sense of control in a life marked by illness, displacement, and emotional instability.

This emotional idealization begins to break down when Fang Yi encounters a horse in Taiwan that reminds her of her beloved Splash in the United States. She tries to bridle the horse, but it resists, which symbolizes her struggle to reestablish a connection to her past. This encounter triggers a psychological rupture. The fantasy of America starts to collapse, and the emotional breakdown that follows marks a turning point. Rather than offering resolution, it forces her to confront the limitations of memory as a source of refuge. Later, when Fang Yi's father discovers her blog post titled "I Hate My Mother," he tells her, "If you keep running away, it won't change no matter where you are." His words reflect the central dilemma of the film: emotional displacement cannot be resolved by changing physical location. Fang Yi must learn to live with contradiction, frustration, and vulnerability within the world she inhabits.

The film concludes with a moment of emotional clarity when Fang Yi, vulnerable and seeking comfort, quietly asks her mother not to leave her. This fragile admission breaks through their ongoing conflict and marks a shift in Fang Yi's emotional stance. Rather than retreating into an idealized memory of the past, she begins to confront the unresolved emotions that define her relationship with her mother. In this moment, she starts to process the emotional legacy she has inherited, and the mother-daughter relationship becomes the central space through which that inheritance is acknowledged and renegotiated.

American Girl reframes diasporic memory not as a nostalgic return, but as a complex, emotional process of recognition and connection. This shift from idealized escape to emotional reckoning highlights how intergenerational relationships in diasporic families become spaces where memory, cultural identity, and emotion are constantly negotiated and redefined. It also reveals how emotions move and shift across family members, and how parents and children often experience cultural displacement in deeply different ways.

5. Comparative reflection: two paths to cultural reconciliation

Both *The Farewell* and *American Girl* explore the intergenerational tensions within Chinese diasporic families, particularly through the lens of mother-daughter relationships. While the two films differ in tone and narrative structure, each reveals how migration, memory, and emotional labor shape the identities of diasporic women across generations. At the center of both stories is a young woman—Billi or Fang Yi—attempting to reconcile conflicting cultural expectations and familial obligations.

However, their respective journeys unfold under different circumstances: one returns voluntarily for a family gathering, while the other is compelled by illness and dislocation.

In *The Farewell*, Billi's temporary return to China allows for a gradual process of reflection and cultural rediscovery. Her resistance to her heritage softens over time, facilitated by a mother who has already adjusted to American life and can offer emotional stability. In contrast, *American Girl* depicts reverse migration as a source of cultural rupture. Fang Yi, having spent formative years in the United States, experiences confusion and alienation upon returning to Taiwan. Her mother, Lily, is also re-entering a culture that has changed in her absence after years abroad, which complicates her ability to guide Fang Yi. The emotional volatility in their relationship arises from their simultaneous vulnerability: a mother navigating illness and relocation, and a daughter struggling to adapt in an unfamiliar environment.

A key distinction lies in how the daughters respond to their mothers' efforts at cultural mediation. Billi resists in quiet ways but ultimately recognizes the unspoken care in her mother's actions. Fang Yi responds with open defiance, as her mother's disciplinary style and high expectations often feel misaligned with the emotional support she needs. Despite their differences, both mothers act as cultural intermediaries, tasked with preserving familial continuity while managing the emotional complexities of transnational life.

The autobiographical nature of both films further enriches their emotional authenticity. Directors Lulu Wang and Fiona Roan draw from their own experiences as second-generation immigrants, crafting daughter characters that reflect their personal struggles with identity and belonging. Their self-narration provides an insider's perspective that avoids exoticizing Chinese culture and instead presents it as emotionally textured and intimately familiar. This narrative choice challenges dominant Western representations of diasporic life and centers the emotional nuance of cultural negotiation.

Through their portrayals of mother-daughter dynamics, *The Farewell* and *American Girl* highlight how cultural memory and emotional inheritance are processed within the family. Rather than offering definitive resolutions, both films depict reconciliation as a process shaped by empathy, misunderstanding, and gradual recognition. In doing so, they reveal how diasporic identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated through intergenerational relationships. Together, these two films illustrate complementary modes of navigating cultural estrangement and belonging: one through silence and restraint, the other through rupture and emotional volatility. Their juxtaposition offers a fuller picture of how diasporic families seek meaning and continuity across emotional and cultural divides.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how *The Farewell* and *American Girl* portray mother-daughter relationships as central sites of cultural transmission and emotional conflict in diasporic families. Through contrasting narratives of voluntary return and forced relocation, the two films offer distinct paths of diasporic identity negotiation, revealing how cultural belonging is not inherited passively but actively worked through within intimate familial dynamics.

Both films underscore the multifaceted role of mothers as cultural mediators. Their labor goes beyond teaching language or enforcing behavioral norms—it involves transmitting emotional patterns shaped by personal history, cultural expectations, and structural constraints. In navigating the gap between first- and second-generation experiences, mothers carry the weight of both cultural preservation and emotional regulation. Their efforts to guide their daughters are shaped by their own vulnerabilities, including illness, displacement, and unspoken grief.

These cinematic narratives contribute valuable insights to diaspora studies. By foregrounding affective transmission and intergenerational dynamics, the films demonstrate how visual storytelling can illuminate the complex emotional architectures of migration. They encourage interdisciplinary engagement with topics such as non-linear identity formation, the gendered dimensions of cultural negotiation, and the often-overlooked phenomenon of forced return migration.

Ultimately, *The Farewell* and *American Girl* both center on maternal love, yet they explore it through vastly different lenses. One emphasizes restraint and quiet reconciliation, while the other confronts loss and cultural estrangement with emotional urgency. This divergence invites a more nuanced understanding of the diverse ways in which diasporic families navigate generational conflict, cultural continuity, and the reconstruction of identity across borders.

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