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Bifocal Intimacy: Negotiating Diasporic Family Conflicts in The Wedding Banquet and The Farewell

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Abstract. This paper examines how diasporic family conflicts in Ang Lee's The Wedding Banquet (1993) and Lulu Wang's The Farewell (2019) reveal the complex negotiations of intimacy within Sino-American families. Through close textual and cinematic analysis, the study explores how intergenerational tensions, cultural values, and moral codes shape relationships across distance and migration. Drawing on theories of diasporic intimacy and homing desire, the paper proposes the concept of bifocal intimacy to describe how diasporic families sustain care by balancing two moral grammars—truth and silence, duty and autonomy, and homeland and hostland. Rather than resolving conflicts, these families maintain closeness through ongoing negotiation and calibrated compromise. By reframing diasporic intimacy as an active and relational process, this study contributes to broader discussions of transnational identity, intergenerational belonging, and the emotional dynamics of diasporic life.

Keywords: Bifocal intimacy, diasporic intimacy, The Wedding Banquet, The Farewell

1. Introduction

Familial disputes can divide and wound, but in diasporic settings, they often bind. Ang Lee's 1993 romantic comedy, The Wedding Banquet (1993), and Lulu Wang's 2019 comedy-drama, The Farewell (2019), each portray Sino-American diasporic families at critical life junctures: marriage and death. The Wedding Banquet tells the story of how Wai-Tung, a gay Taiwanese immigrant living in New York with his Jewish American boyfriend, is forced into a sham marriage with a struggling Chinese artist in need of a green card to please his visiting parents. In The Farewell, Billi, a young Chinese American woman, learns that her grandmother, Nai Nai, has been diagnosed with a rapidly progressing terminal illness. Billi's family decides to hide this diagnosis from Nai Nai and instead organizes a wedding in China for Nai Nai to attend before she dies. Both films depict conflicts and cultural friction between generations and across spatial divides in diasporic families. The complexity of these tensions reveal how diasporic intimacy itself—shaped by intergenerational gaps and what diasporic studies scholar Avtar Brah refers to as "homing desire"—must be lived through two cultural grammars at once. This paper argues that the multi-layered tensions in both films exhibit forms of intimacy that reside within the fragmented relationships in diaspora families, which are often held together by secrets and mistranslations. In contrast to literary scholar Svetlana Boym, who emphasizes fragility, this paper proposes viewing The Farewell and The Wedding Banquet

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through a concept that the author coins as "bifocal intimacy." In the Sino-American diasporic context, bifocal intimacy emerges from the constant negotiation between conflicting obligations of truth and silence, duty and autonomy, homeland and hostland. Intimacy is sustained not by resolving these tensions but by carrying them together, making layered conflict the very condition of diasporic care.

2. Inter-generational and cultural conflicts in Sino-American families

While intergenerational gaps exist in most families, these divides are deepened in Sino-American diasporic families through clashes between dominant value systems and cultural norms in the United States versus Sino-sphere countries. In The Farewell and The Wedding Banquet, the older generation embodies Chinese cultural norms. At the same time, the younger characters express more liberal and progressive values shaped by their experiences living in New York City. As a result, the intergenerational gaps exhibited in these two films are irreducible to youthful rebellion against parental expectations; they are structural divides where belonging, morals, and cultural continuity are all at stake.

During the ceremony's crescendo in The Wedding Banquet, beginning at 00:54 [1], the wedding publicly fulfills Wai Tung's parents' expectations for their son, which are deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural imperatives to preserve the patriarchal lineage, promote filial duty, and "save face." In the Chinese cultural context, lineage refers to the continuation of the family line through marriage and children, filial duty names the moral obligation of children to respect and obey their elders, and face signifies an individual or their family's reputation and social standing. The large, lavish wedding banquet ritual simultaneously affirms all three imperatives–at least to those attendees who are unaware of the son's secret gay identity– as it promises descendants. Moreover, the marriage demonstrates Wai-Tung's filial devotion and provides his family with social recognition. When the festivities end, Wai Tung's father expresses content, as his desire to achieve family continuity and social recognition is now complete.

In contrast, Wai Tung and his long-time boyfriend, Simon, experience the same ritual with unease. The ceremony denies them the possibility of a public same-sex partnership and social recognition of their relationship. Wai Tung's and Simon's movements are anxiety-riddled. Their interactions are constrained to glances and small gestures, such as when Simon discreetly wipes lipstick from Wai Tung's mouth (00:56:00). During the banquet, the camera's long lateral sweep across the ballroom is punctuated by awkward, tight, close-ups of their stiff expressions, thereby creating a stark contrast between the parents' delight and their discomfort. This scene illustrates that the intergenerational gap is not a minor difference in taste but a clash of moral logics.

3. Liminal figures and layered family dynamics

The division between the divergent cultures and generations rarely maps onto simple binary oppositions. Indeed, diasporic families can also birth figures who are caught between two cultural grammars and who embody and negotiate both at once. In The Farewell, Billi's parents, especially her mother, stand as liminal figures who carry the influence of both codes simultaneously. The film initially presents Billi's relationship with her mother, Jian, as a typical age-based tension found in multi-generational families. At 00:39:15, Jian insists on deciding how many dumplings her daughter will have for dinner. Even when Billi clearly announces she will only have 10 dumplings, her mother insists on a different number. This interaction reflects a pre-existing fractured dynamic

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between a daughter and mother, where the mother believes she knows best due to her greater life experience and parental authority.

In contrast, after Billi and her mom have traveled to China, the film portrays how their dynamic is complicated by the diasporic aspect of their familial experience. In one pivotal scene, the family members from Billi's father's side gather around a table for dinner after her cousin's wedding photoshoot (00:39:20 – 00:40:31). Several family members ask Billi if she plans to move back to take advantage of the country's fast-growing economy. The scene spirals into a conversation about the value of money and the worth of sending kids to America for education, depicting the subtle competition between Billi's mother, Jian, and the sister of Billi's father, Auntie Ling:

AUNTIE LING: How long would it take to make a million dollars in America?] (Mandarin)

BILLI: Um... a long time. (Mandarin)

AUNTIE LING: Really? It's very easy in China. (Mandarin)

.....

JIAN: If it's so easy to get rich here, then why are you sending Bao to America for college? (Mandarin)

AUNTIE LING: For more opportunity. (Mandarin)

.....

JIAN: So raising a kid is like playing the stock market?] (Mandarin)

BILLI (to father): What's that mean? (English)

HAIYAN (Billi's father): They're saying you're a stock investment and you're going to make us a lot of money. (English)

JIAN: But I can't expect that from you, right? You are the losing stock. (English)

Jian smiles after her comment, spoken in English as she stares at Billi, leaving the viewer uncertain whether Jian seeks to humiliate or merely tease her daughter publicly. The camera focuses on Billi, whose wide eyes fixate on a blank space in front of her while her head slumps down between her stiff shoulders, as if she wishes to disappear beneath the table. She remains silent, and it is clear to the viewer that Billi is accustomed to these kinds of remarks from her mother.

During this exchange, Jian is both critical of and indirectly defends Billi in front of her in-laws. Her defense does not stem from validating Billi's American-shaped ideals–but from the Chinese principle of saving face. This moment depicts Billi's mother as a liminal figure, shaped by both Chinese and American cultures at once. The camerawork in this scene reinforces Jian's liminal status. The wide shots frame the family in a single shared space as they sit around a large round table, creating a sense of collectivity. But once the conversations begin, Billi, Auntie Ling, and Jian are never included in the same frame. The medium-framed camera cuts back and forth between each speaker, consistently placing Billi, Auntie Ling, and Jian in the center of the frame, seated between two other family members, visually emphasizing their divergences. In particular, the camera frequently cuts to Jian's facial expressions as she reacts to what Billi and Auntie Ling say, suggesting that she is the mediator and judge between the two sides of this conversation, and thus between the two value systems that Billi and Auntie Ling represent. Visually, Jian's seat between two of her husband's family members suggests that she sides with Chinese values, but her dialogue positions her as an individual voice. She reaffirms her Chinese cultural codes while also highlighting how Billi's values have been shaped by her American socialization. While Jian does not affirm those values, her comments nevertheless challenge Auntie Ling and demonstrate Jian's understanding of the cultural forces that have shaped Billi's worldview. Jian's liminal position complicates the binary between "traditional versus progressive" in Sino-American diasporic family conflicts, showcasing how diasporic conditions generate more than two opposing camps. Indeed, tensions in diasporic

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families are often layered and multi-directional, resulting from the ongoing coexistence and friction of multiple norms within a family. This renders diasporic family intimacy both more complex and more fragile, both more multifaceted and more fragmented.

4. Diasporic intimacy and the function of secrets

It is precisely this fragile layering of values within the diasporic family that creates the grounds upon which intimacy operates. Under these conditions, love often travels through partial disclosure and coded speech, not because truth is rejected, but because no single moral code can be honored without harming another. Literary theorist and Slavic studies scholar Svetlana Boym illuminates this form of familial closeness within tensions. In "On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes", she defines diasporic intimacy as necessarily partial and unfinished. It is a relation that "can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets [2]. It is spoken in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation." Boym emphasizes that diasporic intimacy is never based on perfect mutual understanding; it is something that exists in gaps. The significance here is that the closeness between individuals within diasporic families is not destroyed, it is maintained and born from these imperfections.

In The Farewell, Billi's scattered family builds intimacy in the gaps, through broken translations, silences, and secrets. The entire premise of the film is a lie that each family member must uphold, indicating that intimacy in this family will be structured more by concealment and less by openness, even though this concealment requires collective agreement and participation. Yet not all secrets are encompassed by the concept of precarious intimacy. Households everywhere keep secrets. What is specific to diasporic families is the medium through which intimacy survives. Boym's definition of a fragile diasporic intimacy names only the inner strain produced when competing cultural logics–birthed solely from diasporic influences–pull an individual in opposite directions. As Boym writes, diasporic intimacy is possible only when one "masters a certain imperfect aesthetic for survival" and learns "to inhabit exile" [2].

Billi experiences this double pull as she struggles against her family's decision to hide the truth from her grandmother. At 00:48:35 in The Farewell, in a scene shot in the corridor of the hospital when Nai Nai is undergoing a checkup due to her worsening health condition, Billi once again wants to tell Nai Nai the truth. Billi believes that this kind of deliberate concealment of Nai Nai's own medical diagnosis is illegal in the United States. The younger sister of Billi's grandmother, little Nai Nai, then firmly dissuades Billi by revealing that Nai Nai had also kept her husband's sickness a secret from him when he was dying:

BILLI: Don't you think she'd be furious if she found out that we all knew and were keeping it from her?

LITTLE NAI NAI: How can she be mad when she did the same thing herself?

BILLI: What do you mean?

LITTLE NAI NAI: When your grandfather had cancer, your Nai Nai lied to him, too. It wasn't until he was very close to the end that she finally told him. (The Farewell 00:48:54 - 00:49:30)

While Billi grapples with this revelation, the cool, static camerawork in this scene shows the unwavering stance of Billi's relatives, suggesting that Billi stands alone in her beliefs. Throughout the film, Billi's motivations for wanting to tell Nai Nai is not only motivated by the American ideal of individual rights, bodily autonomy, and self-determination, but also by her love for her grandmother. Bili sees it as an act of love to fight for disclosure and truth. But this new piece of information reminds her that Nai Nai's values are firmly rooted in Chinese cultural norms, and that perhaps the best way to show love and care is by adhering to the cultural code that Nai Nai

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understands. This ultimately causes Billi to adhere to her family's decision. In a later scene, Billi sprints to the hospital in an attempt to intercept the hospital report and forge a false one before the caretaker can deliver it to Nai Nai (1:20:40). The suspension of her initial moral intuition can be seen as an act that reflects the homing tether between Billi and her Chinese origin. Billi's homing desire/tether does not change her fundamental belief system, but it does pull her towards agreeing with Chinese ways of upholding intimacy.

Billi's hesitation is not simple indecision. She stands between two moral grammars: one reads truth-telling as a form of respect for the person; the other reads protective silence as exhibiting love for the family and for elders. Her eventual decision to remain silent aligns with homing desire and keeps the family whole, yet it also registers a loss of her American side, a loss she has to carry. As this film depicts, the diasporic subject caught between these two grammars must hold incompatible obligations at once. What results is a closeness that persists by accepting partial knowledge, a form of intimacy specific to the pressures of diaspora rather than a trait of secrecy in general.

5. Homing desire and intergenerational tether

In these families, intergenerational gaps are rarely resolved through complete agreement, but they do not escalate into rupture either. Instead, the family members remain tethered by what Avtar Brah calls a "homing desire." In Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities, Brah explains this concept as a pull back to the homeland and origin, despite distance [3]. For Brah, the origin includes all ideals, people, and customs that strongly represent it. This concept is reflected in both The Farewell and The Wedding Banquet. Whilst Billi and Wai-Tung may not completely share the value systems of their parents, they remain tethered to them through responsibility, belonging, and family connection. This tether is double-edged: it keeps intimacy alive across differences, yet it simultaneously deepens inter-personal strains because neither generation can entirely abandon the opinions of other family members. As a result, the homing desire keeps people tethered to origins they can never fully inhabit. It sustains closeness, but also ensures incompleteness.

In some cases, a desire for origin can be tied not just to the origin itself, but to the people who feel like home. In The Wedding Banquet, while Wai-tung proceeds with the marriage to please his parents and live in accordance with their familial values, Wai-tung's father, Mr. Gao, is simultaneously tethered to his family and sacrifices his own values for Wai-tung. In a conversation with Simon, Mr. Gao stoically states, "I watch, I heard, I learned," thereby revealing that he knows the true, romantic nature of Simon's and Wait-Tung's relationship. Instead of telling the rest of the family, he offers Simon a private recognition: "Wai-Tung is my son, so you are my son also." He then stuffs a thick red envelope into Simon's hand, which contains more money than a Chinese parent would traditionally give to their son's landlord. This act signifies his acknowledgment that Simon is not the landlord and implies his acceptance of their relationship. At the same time, Mr. Gao makes it clear that this revelation should remain a secret between him and Simon, as Mr. Gao is not ready to acknowledge Simon in front of the whole family openly.

This conversation and Mr. Gao's gift thus signify fragility and avoidance: Mr. Gao's care moves through indirect acknowledgment and controlled quiet, exemplifying what Boym discusses as intimacy reached "through indirection and intimation." What he offers is not fusion but "a precarious affection," grounded in a lasting "suspicion of a single home," which is why his recognition steadies the family without erasing loss or resolving contradictions [2]. These examples confirm Boym's insight that in diaspora, intimacy is not destroyed by what cannot be said, but is instead maintained through secrecy and gaps in understanding." Mr. Gao deliberately reframes his recognition in terms of lineage, a critical Chinese value, rather than sexuality. He tells Simon that he

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does not understand homosexual love, but appeals to Wei Wei's pregnancy and what's best for his future grandchild as the reason for accepting Simon into the family. This framing allows Mr. Gao to sidestep the conflict that an open acknowledgment of his son's sexuality would provoke, thereby preserving family harmony. The choice also marks a shift in how Mr. Gao locates home: preserving his patriarchal lineage while quietly expanding its meaning to include the male partner who stands beside his son. His desire to connect with his family pushes him to reframe a love that is generally taboo in Chinese culture, and moves him closer to the people who now define home for him.

6. Discussion: from fragile intimacy to bifocal intimacy

Boym's framework, however, cannot fully capture the forms of diasporic intimacy displayed in the Sino-American families depicted in these two films. Boym describes intimacy in diasporic contexts as fragile because it is partial and unfinished, and that it thrives in secrecy, silence, and mistranslation. In both films, families remain tethered together by what is left unsaid. But this framework is missing a crucial piece. The Farewell and The Wedding Banquet portray intimacy that is not merely endured in gaps, but is constantly negotiated between two competing cultural languages. In other words, Boym helps reveal the fragility underlying diasporic familial relations, but overlooks the families' efforts to mend the tensions. Both Wai-Tung's family and Billi's family are not simply carrying the burden of incomplete ties; they are actively rebalancing truth and silence, autonomy and duty, homeland and hostland. This paper refers to these kinds of constant negotiations as bifocal intimacy [4]. Similar to how a person wears bifocal glasses, diasporic families must view their relationships through two lenses at once. At times, one lens comes into focus; at other times, the second lens. Both lenses remain present and frame the world as a collective whole. Diasporic intimacy is therefore fragile not only because it is incomplete, but because it must be lived and sustained through the tension between two simultaneously present, irreconcilable perspectives. This distinction matters because it shifts our understanding of diasporic intimacy: closeness is not passively endured, but is actively sustained through negotiation.

In The Farewell, Billi is caught between the Western code that equates honesty with respect and the Chinese grammar that equates silence with protection. Early in the film, she insists on telling Nai Nai the truth, yet she eventually participates in the family's silence. She channels her care for Nai Nai through ritual and shared meals, acts that Nai Nai understands, rather than through disclosure. Billi cries privately and argues with her mother, but she still follows the family's rules and keeps quiet in front of Nai Nai. Bifocal intimacy shines through her bond with her family, sustained by moving back and forth between two lenses of truth and silence. Although towards the end, Billi's actions signal to the audience that she is aligned with her Chinese family. What is significant here is not whether she fully agrees with either side, but that her closeness with her grandmother stems from the effort to carry both grammars at once. The entirety of The Farewell captures the progression and eventual equilibrium of Billi's internal turmoil. At the end, she gains and accepts a new, more Chinese perspective by not unveiling the secret, while still holding on to her Western ideals. This shift embodies bifocal intimacy, highlighting durability in spite of fractures and fragility. Billi does not simply endure a gap; she actively negotiates two conflicting rules of care, and in the process, expresses her care.

In The Wedding Banquet, the previously mentioned pivotal scene is the father's private conversation with Simon. The father is not simply tethered to his home but is actively balancing the Chinese traditional logic of lineage with the unspoken recognition of his son's partnership. He cannot collapse one into the other; therefore, he privately widens the lineage to include Simon, and he sustains both at once. This is the negotiation fundamental to bifocal intimacy: intimacy preserved

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not through endurance of fragility—Wai-tung's father's affection does not solely survive hidden in the crack of silence—but through re-balancing two conflicting rules of care. He retains his Chinese values of face and duty to lineage, while actively inventing a new path to uphold both cultural grammars. Mr. Gao's action is not just precarious intimacy or homing desire, but the lived practice of bifocal intimacy in diasporic families [5].

7. Conclusion

Viewed together, The Farewell and The Wedding Banquet show that intimacy in Sino-American diasporic families is sustained through ongoing negotiation rather than resolution. Building on Boym's account of partial, secret-bearing ties, these films illustrate a distinct practice of "bifocal intimacy": family members continually shift between two moral grammars—truth and lies, autonomy and duty, homeland and hostland—without collapsing one into the other. Billi's choice to protect Nai Nai through silence, and Mr. Gao's private recognition of Simon within the values of lineage, exemplify how members of diasporic families, divided by age and distance, nevertheless build closeness through calibrated compromises that honor both cultural grammars at once. The result is neither agreement nor rupture, but an equilibrium in which conflicts are managed, reframed, and carried. "Bifocal intimacy" thus names the acts and choices which enable diasporic families to to sustain care and connection while holding two incompatible moral grammars in view.

While this study provides a nuanced analysis of diasporic intimacy within Sino-American families, its scope is limited to two case studies situated in a specific cultural and linguistic context. Future research will expand the analytical framework to include a wider range of diasporic narratives across different cultural settings, exploring how diverse moral grammars and familial structures shape intimacy under migration and displacement. Overall, this study provides new insights into the emotional negotiations of diasporic families and highlights the importance of viewing intimacy as an active process of cross-cultural mediation and coexistence.

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