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Silence Across Screens:

A Dual-Method Analysis of Gendered Emotional Labor in *The Farewell*

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Silence Across Screens: A Dual-Method Analysis of Gendered Emotional Labor in *The Farewell*

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This article examines how *The Farewell* (2019), directed by Lulu Wang, constructs and circulates gendered emotional labor within a transnational Chinese family. While the film is frequently discussed through binaries such as collectivism versus individualism or truth versus filial piety, this study shifts the focus to a less examined question: who performs the emotional labor required to sustain the family's decision to conceal a terminal diagnosis, and how is that labor culturally interpreted? I argue that the film frames emotional labor as feminized, unpaid, and structurally necessary work that sustains intergenerational and transnational cohesion. Through silence, restrained gesture, mise-en-scène, and narrative concealment, women—daughter, mother, aunts, and grandmother—are positioned as emotional regulators who absorb and redistribute affective labor across cultural and generational divides.

To explore both representation and interpretation, this study adopts a dual-method approach. First, drawing on feminist film theory and the work of Stuart Hall, Sara Ahmed, Arlie Hochschild, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, it conducts a close textual analysis of the film's cinematic strategies. Second, it employs grounded theory coding to compare audience reception on Douban (China) and Metacritic (United States), examining how viewers interpret the film's central "deception" through distinct moral frameworks. The findings reveal that emotional labor functions as a culturally mediated "currency" of belonging: Chinese audiences tend to frame concealment as relational care, while many American reviewers interpret it through lenses of individual autonomy and psychological transparency. By integrating film analysis with reception study, this article demonstrates that gendered emotional labor is not only cinematically encoded but also differently valued. across cultural contexts.

1. Introduction

Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019) does not begin with a direct conflict, but with a deliberately built silence. The film opens with a trans-Pacific phone call, which serves to establish the emotional tone of the film: anxiety is shifted to ease, love is conveyed through concealment, and emotions are revealed through careful management. Inspired by Lulu Wang's own experiences, the story tells of a family who decides to keep illness a secret when they learn their grandmother has terminal cancer and use a hastily arranged wedding as a pretext for a final family gathering. While *The Farewell* is often characterized as a sensitive investigation into immigrant identity, it is also an insightful consideration of the emotional labor. For example, examining the cultural logic, gender distribution, and moral ambiguity of this emotional labor that has yet to be theorized in the current state of academic research.

Most reviews and discussions about the film focus on familiar binaries: sincerity versus assimilation, Eastern collectivism versus Western individualism, and truth versus filial piety. While these frameworks shed light on some important issues that arise within the film's transnational context, they overlook a fundamental analytic question: who pays the emotional labor required to maintain this lie, and what is the cost of that labor? This essay argues that *The Farewell* attributes the role of emotional labor to women's work, which is unpaid and invisible, but this emotional labor plays an important role within cross-cultural and cross-regional family connections. In this film, women bear this burden disproportionately. Billi, the film's Chinese American protagonist, struggles to suppress her Western moral commitment to personal honesty; her mother wrestles with traditional expectations and immigrant identity; and her aunts manage emotional conflicts at the wedding ceremony, carefully smoothing over any emotional friction. Their labor sustains the emotional core of the film, but it is often overlooked and unrecognized.

Although the film clearly depicts how the gendered emotional labor occurs in this film, audiences are likely to understand and evaluate this labor very differently according to their cultural background. Preliminary observations from online audience commentary suggest that Chinese and American commentators approach the central concealment of the film from different moral perspectives, which are rooted in cultural conceptions of family, care, and honesty. These different understandings across different cultures are not assumed to be fixed or universal patterns, but rather serve as the starting point of this study. Through more rigorous and empirical analysis, this research systematically investigates any such cross-cultural differences in interpretation found in audience evaluations.

In addressing these issues, this study adopts a dual approach: one considers the textual analysis, the other audience reception. First, combining insights from feminist film theory, Stuart Hall's 1990 theory of immigrant identity, Sara Ahmed's 2004 conception of affective economies, Arlie Hochschild's 1983 theory of emotional labor, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 2003 transnational feminist critique, this paper examines how the film *The Farewell* constructs emotional labor, a gendered and culturally

contextualized burden, through cinematic means such as scene design, body movements, shot composition, sound, and narrative concealment. Then, with the help of grounded theory analysis based on NVivo coding, this study investigates the audience feedback on Douban and Metacritic, taking these two platforms as discursive fields to discuss family care and gendered cultural norms, within which audience views may be expressed, confirmed, or contested.

By putting together textual strategies in the film with audience reception across different cultural contexts, this paper demonstrates how emotional labor serves as a transnational "currency" that allows people to belong across borders, while at the same time reinforcing patriarchal expectations of female self-sacrifice. *The Farewell*, therefore, becomes more than a family deception film but also a critique on the burden women carry in managing emotions within family relationships. To examine how gendered emotional labor is represented in the film and interpreted by audiences across cultural contexts, this essay therefore raises the following research questions:

Research Question 1

How does *The Farewell* use cinematic techniques, such as framing, gesture, sound design, and narrative styles, to portray emotional labor as gendered work within a transnational Chinese family?

Research Question 2

How do Chinese audiences on Douban and American reviewers on Metacritic interpret the "deception" plot in the film from different perspectives? What do these differing interpretations reveal about the social norms about caregiving, truth-telling, and gender roles in different cultural contexts?

2. Literature Review

This paper interprets *The Farewell* from an integrated theoretical perspective, where Stuart Hall's, Sara Ahmed's, Arlie Hochschild's, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's theories are not independent frames but rather interconnected and thus jointly forming perspectives. Jointly, they reveal how transnational identities are generated by the flow of emotions, how these emotional fluxes are turned into gendered emotional labor, and how this labor should be comprehended through the power relations in transnational histories rather than through Western universalist standpoints. Rather than discussing such theories as four parallel components, this paper links them together and demonstrates the way each of the theoretical frameworks interprets the others and why their intersections are so vital to analyze the portrayal of emotional labor in the movie and its reception at diverse cultural levels.

The core of Hall's argument is the idea that transnational identity is not a fixed state but a process of "becoming," and it is from this vantage that this study's analysis may gain a foothold. According to Hall, identity is constituted through continuity ("shared cultural symbols") and rupture ("the breaks that shape us") (260), furnishing an entrance into the emotional suspension Billi experiences between Chinese and American cultures in the film. At the same time, however, Hall's theory opens another, more interesting line of inquiry: how, exactly, does this continual transnational "becoming" come to be felt? Ahmed supplies an answer. Treating emotions as cultural practices, Ahmed says emotions "stick" to bodies and flow through social space (Ahmed 11-13); thus, Ahmed argues that even the constitution of identity is not just accomplished through the transfer of historical conditions but is completed through the flow of emotion. Therefore, Ahmed effectively supplements Hall's theory: if transnational identity is a process of rupture, then emotions are the medium in which that rupture is perceived, negotiated, and embodied. Billi's guilt, longing, and conflicted feeling do not simply express her transnational identity; they are themselves constitutive elements of that identity.

When this theoretical conversation between Hall and Ahmed takes place, Hochschild's theory is bound to enter this conversation, for if the flow and accumulation of emotions are unequal, as Ahmed seems to suggest, then the work of managing these emotional flows must fall disproportionately on women within the family. Hochschild's theory of "emotional labor" is precisely designed to describe this kind of work. She first proposed this theory in the context of the service industry: people need to manage their emotions well and show it on their faces and bodies so that everyone can see it. However, as she later argues in "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value," this concept has increasingly been applied to the domestic and transnational care sectors (249-250). Importantly, Hochschild extended Marx's theory of "surplus value" to personal emotions. She proposed that in the global care chain, emotions will be transferred: the care and love that caregivers were supposed to give to their families has become a residual emotional value that is transferred to the families of employers in wealthy countries. She believes that this emotional surplus value is an important but invisible resource that maintains social stability and family harmony at the top of the care chain in developed countries (262). This theoretical framework can explain why in *The Farewell*, in order to maintain emotional harmony at home, everyone chooses to hide the truth from their grandmother, and this hard and heavy pressure is unfortunately placed on a few family members. Hochschild further develops the theory propounded by Hall when she states that a transnational subject such as Billi would experience what she calls "contradictory cultural emotion," or emotions molded by the tussle between competing moral systems. In short, from this perspective, Hochschild not only extends Ahmed's theory, but also deepens it: Ahmed may believe that emotions glue people together into collectives, but Hochschild highlights that this emotional bonding requires labor and that this labor is distributed unequally, its inequality guaranteed by factors such as gender, class, and global mobility (251).

Mohanty expanded the discussion by questioning Western feminism. She believes that Western theories have many underlying assumptions when explaining emotional behavior in non Western societies. Her critique of "universal womanhood" and her insistence on contextual, anti-colonial feminist analysis (Mohanty 22–24) directly interrogate the interpretive frameworks through which emotional labor in *The Farewell* is often read. Mohanty warns that care and gender analyses, such as Hochschild's global care chains: a series of transnational links through which caregiving labor is transferred from poorer to wealthier households (250), are at risk of generating colonialist narratives if they represent non-Western women as passive victims rather than as agents enacting their agency against complex cultural and geopolitical hindrances (40-42). To prevent one-sided interpretation, Mohanty believes that two key points should be focused on: first, women's own initiative, as they are not only passive recipients of arrangements; second, specific historical and cultural backgrounds, which are key factors influencing their choices (17-23). Mohanty does not see non Western women as people who can only be pushed by various rules, but rather believes that they will take the initiative to negotiate and fight for their rights. In this way, our understanding of the concept of "emotional labor" will not be so singular. Thus,

incorporating her theory into those by Ahmed and Hochschild, Mohanty reconstitutes emotional labor as a cultural practice rather than an unconscious burden, one firmly situated within immigration histories, collectivism, and racialized expectations. This emotional labor is perceived through a Western liberal optic as oppressive or duplicitous; however, for Mohanty, this precisely reflects a localized ethic of care and sense of interpersonal responsibility.

By viewing these four theorists as interlocutors instead of isolated theories, this essay sets up an integral way of thinking: diaspora leads to affective tension (Hall), emotions circulate and stick unevenly (Ahmed), these processes rely on gendered labor as a foundation for societal unity (Hochschild), and the meaning of these actions have to be decoded via culturally specific and anti-colonial feminist readings (Mohanty). The discussion not only sets up an integral framework for textual analysis but also lays down groundwork for an analysis on reception, which reviews how Chinese and U.S. audience members, influenced by differing notions for emotional cultures and feminist ideologies, interpret the exact same representation of these emotions and labor within differing moral backgrounds.

3. Methodology

This study uses a dual qualitative research approach—textual analysis combined with audience reception analysis, based on grounded theory—to investigate how *The Farewell* expresses gendered emotional labor and how this emotional labor is culturally interpreted by audiences in China and the United States. The following research methods are not introduced in strict procedural order but as an interpretive framework through which the film's form and audience interpretations can be put in conceptual dialogue. As my central argument is about the cultural intelligibility of gendered emotional labor, each method addresses a larger question: How does the film construct emotional labor? And how do audiences interpret this content through divergent moral and emotional frameworks?

3.1 Textual Analysis

Scene One: Opening Phone Call

The film opens with an extended phone call between Billi and her grandmother Nai Nai, a sequence that immediately establishes the affective and aesthetic grammar of *The Farewell*. Wang shoots Billi wandering through the gray streets of New York with a long take, in which her voice is soft and the posture of her body a little lazy. The remote siren, passing cars, and humming of the city in the background of the shot collectively assume an atmosphere of geographic and emotional distance. However, when the scene cuts to Billi's grandmother in the light-filled hallways of the Changchun Hospital, the sound environment takes a radical about-face: the background noise falls away into an eerie silence that's eventually punctured by her grandmother's warm and cheerful voice. The startling imagery of the hospital juxtaposes jarringly with the relaxed tone adopted by the grandmother and well demonstrates Stuart Hall's notion of producing meaning through difference (Hall 263): the film visually presents images that Billy herself cannot see-the audience feels this emotional dislocation within cross-national communication.

Wang uses cross-cutting not only as a narrative device but also as an affective device that plays off closeness and distance existing simultaneously. Billy must appear calm even though she is filled with anxiety; the grandmother must appear healthy even though her body is weak. This mutual emotional performance resonates with Sara Ahmed's notion of the "affective economy" and shows emotions attaching to persons and circulating across spaces (Ahmed 11–13). In this scene, the presence of guilt is linked to Billy, her breathing pauses, and she looks down, while the presence of comfort is linked to the grandmother. In transnational space, the distribution of emotional labor is also imbalanced. Billy has to suppress her concern, not wanting to distress her grandmother, while the grandmother has to hide her fear in order to reassure Billy, both of which are evident in this scene.

The structure of this phone call also reveals the premise behind the gendered emotional labor underpinning the film. Billy's hesitation, pause, and quiet tone are representative of the phenomenon described by Hochschild as "surface acting," the demonstration of emotionally expressive conduct in order to protect others from the effects of one's inner experiences (Hochschild 250). However, this emotional labor does not come from employment, which stems from familial ties, thus remains unseen and unrewarded. Therefore, this scene depicts the central argument of this film: emotional labor is an invisible infrastructure in transnational family life. Also, combined with Mohanty's critique of Western assumptions about the transparency of real emotions (Mohanty 33–34), this scene resists interpreting Billy's restraint as dishonesty. Instead, Wang frames the suppression of emotions as a form of care within a transnational, culturally contextualized context.

Through minimal gesture, careful sound design, and transnational cross-cutting, the opening scene introduces the affective contradictions that will structure the entire film. Billi speaks from a diasporic "position of enunciation" (Hall 257), wherein she is emotionally steady in one cultural context, but her internal being is shaped by the other culture. The telephone conversations do not just carry the story forward, they also highlighted Billi's emotional detachment from cross-cultural experiences. This plot does not allow emotions to naturally express themselves, but instead shows that emotions are reconciled and suppressed in long-distance communication, and the expression is also very disjointed, making people feel a clear emotional dislocation and estrangement.



Fig. 1 | Hospital diagnosis meeting scene illustrating intergenerational negotiation and affective restraint. Screenshot from *the Farewell* (2019), directed by Lulu Wang.

Scene Two: The Hospital Diagnosis Meeting

The second significant scene is when family members assemble at Changchun Hospital to talk about their grandmother's condition. The director, Wang, establishes this scene with a cool, bare visual style, with the family sitting in a semicircle around a doctor, with cold white fluorescent lights above, and behind them is a long, fuzzy corridor. This calm, vacant environment not only emphasizes the professional logic of the health institution but also draws attention to the emotional toll on the family. The doctor's explanation of how serious the illness is interrupted by the director's intercutting between a wide-angle shot of the entire family room to close-ups of the emotions left unexpressed: lips pinched

shut, avoidant gazes, clenched fists. It is the positioning of characters that indicates the gender disparity of emotionally expressive authority in this scene: women will actively maintain each other's emotional atmosphere, such as guiding conversations, conveying medical information tactfully, and staying calm. But male characters are mostly passive, rarely actively soothing or regulating emotions, and mostly only passively responding.

Seated closest to the doctor, the aunt immediately assumes responsibility for guiding the conversation, her tone firm yet restrained. She nods, comforts, and translates medical terms into emotional cues in order to help the rest of the family understand. Indeed, her actions fulfill Hochschild's definition of "emotional labor," managing emotions "to maintain an outward appearance, thereby inducing the appropriate psychological state in others" (253). The aunt's composure serves as the emotional anchor for the family's decision to conceal the grandmother's terminal illness from her. In contrast, Billi stands at the edge of the family, her visible emotional distress marking her as an emotional "outsider" in the visual field—she seems too American, too uncontrollable, untaught in the necessary emotional restraint expected by her family. To gain a better understanding of the moral frameworks that influence Billi's dilemma, it is useful to draw on Richard Nisbett's (2003) discussion of the divergent cognitive and moral traditions of ancient Greece and China.

The Western moral system, as adopted by the United States, is rooted in Greek philosophy, which privileges individualism, the search for truth, and universalism. Nisbett writes that the Greeks "were concerned with understanding the fundamental nature of the world through abstract rules and formal logic" (4), and conceived of the individual as "an encapsulated unit who maintained a unique identity across social settings" (2). This is reflected in the moral response of the American characters, whose commitment to telling the truth is rooted in the idea that the patient has a right to know. Deception, regardless of motivation, violates the principle of individual autonomy.

The Chinese moral system, as influenced by both Confucianism and Taoism, privileges harmony, relationships, and contextual ethics. Here, the individual is "first and foremost a member of a collective... for whom harmony in relationships becomes a chief goal of social life" (2, 23). This is reflected in the family's deception of the grandmother, which is motivated by a desire for harmony. Nisbett writes that, for the Chinese, "there is no necessary incompatibility between the belief that A is the case and the belief that not-A is the case" (10), a dialectical approach that allows for the coexistence of contradictions. This allows the Chinese family to live with the truth of the disease and the lie of the deception as simultaneously existing realities. Billi, as a woman caught between two moral systems, is experiencing the "affective tension" of diasporic identity, as discussed by Hall, where one is drawn into a new moral system while being embedded in another (262).

This division of emotions provides a graphic illustration of Ahmed's thesis that emotions can "stick" to some bodies, thereby inhabiting a shared emotional alignment. In this scenario, calmness "sticks" to the aunt and mother but not to Billy, where vulnerability takes hold instead. These affective assignments do not arise naturally; they are socially constructed: In her study of rural China, Tamara Jacka writes: "It is not so much that women are expected to do more, or devote more time to, domestic work, but that they are required to take on more responsibility for the psychological, emotional and moral, as well as physical, wellbeing of other family members" (104). In other words, emotional management is constructed as a gendered responsibility within family ethics. This pattern persists in contemporary China, and is even intensified. This is an ongoing phenomenon in modern Chinese culture and is in fact exacerbated. Yingchun Ji argues that the "feminization of care" is one of the most important characteristics of modern Chinese families, where women are the main caregivers in both an emotional and physical capacity (1-2).

Hall's contention that cultural identity is constituted through "rupture and differences" (Hall 260–261) clarifies why Billy's affective responses seem incongruous in this context: she is feeling her way into incommensurable conflict between two moral systems, which have dramatically conflicting ethical requirements around veracity, accountability, and the expression of emotion.

Here, Mohanty's critique of Western universalism is particularly pertinent. Western audiences may view the concealment within families as an act of patriarchy or oppression. However, Mohanty contests that the basis of feminist analysis should be rooted in historical specifics, instead of being framed by the moral measuring devices of the West (Mohanty 40-42). Wang presents the process of family decision-making with much meticulousness to showcase that in such a cultural context, an act of concealment is an act of care rather than a form of deception. Silence does not imply the negation of truth but implies an act of collective responsibility. Using clever camera angles, controlled tone, and movement, this scene shows how emotional labor can sustain family cohesion across generations and cultures.



Fig. 2 | Wedding banquet scene highlighting gendered emotional regulation and ritual atmosphere. Screenshot from *the Farewell* (2019), directed by Lulu Wang.

Scene Three: Wedding Banquet

The banquet is constructed by Wang as a ritualistic setting, filled with rich symbolic red, which is a metaphor for happiness, celebration, and good luck (Zhang 93). However, beneath the deeper red color, there is immense pressure on the characters. Through long tracking shots, the audience sees a series of subtle performance, forced laughter, stiff smiles, flickering glances, within the banquet hall. The nonverbal behavior is channeled towards what Laura Marks terms "haptic visuality," a visuality that is more concerned with textures, body language, and sensations than with dialogue, which serves as a means to describe an emotion incapable of being verbalized (Marks 45). The apparent cheerfulness of the banquet, such as laughter, bright colors, and celebratory rituals, does not conceal emotion but instead becomes a medium through which underlying tension and grief are communicated.

The emotional structure of the banquet collapses when Uncle Haibin makes a drunken speech in which he thanks his family while attempting to stifle his emotions. His words change between joy and sadness. Director Lulu Wang gradually lowered the background volume of the movie, hoping his uncle's voice could be heard amidst the noisy yet deliberately maintained atmosphere of joy. His speech wavered between gratitude and pain because he

was currently bound by uncontrollable emotions. Such a collapse underscores the fragility of emotional labor shoring up the family's false façade. Ahmed's theory further elucidates the intensity of this moment: emotions flow and accumulate on the surface of the body until they exceed the limits of control and erupt (Ahmed 28–29). The exception of allowing Uncle Haibin to lose control of his emotions after getting drunk, as well as Aunt's stiff smile and efforts to maintain the situation, all indicate that the main responsibility for maintaining family emotions and handling emotional crises has always been borne by women for a long time. From this, it can be seen that Uncle Haibin's public expression of emotions not only does not deny the view that women bear emotional labor, but also reveals the essence of gender division of labor: men have the privilege of occasionally releasing emotions, while women need to continue to bear the heavy responsibility of emotional management and emotional repair.

The camera's attention to the Aunty Ling, Uncle Haibin's wife, during the speech highlights emotional labor as gendered work. Through her tense smiles, tightened jaws, and several looks in the direction of other guests, her effort at stabilizing the scene and maintaining the emotional script is exposed. This is emotional labor in its purest form: an act of active atmosphere regulation with a view to securing the collective. Hochschild's "deep acting"—working to internalize emotional expectations internally to present a display that may appear true (Hochschild 256)—is asserted here in the form of her continuous effort. She smiles not out of genuine happiness but out of a sense of obligation.

Hall's concept of diasporic identity becomes visible in Billi during this sequence. In the above excerpt, Wang changes camera position every other second, zooming in on Billy's face as she would laugh, then cry, struggle to repress her emotions, and again look away. Billy's emotional confusion illustrates well the state described by Hall, in which "diasporic identity" constantly negotiates between cultural emotional codes (258). Neither does she completely fulfill the emotional mold of a Chinese family nor does she completely live up to the standards of personal emotional honesty expected from American culture.

This banquet scene also reflects Mohanty's warning about imposing Western feminist standards on non-Western cultures. For Western audiences, this scene may appear emotionally repressive. But from a transnational feminist perspective, it reveals the culturally defined role of women in maintaining ritual harmony. Wang places women—instead of men—at the center of the story to bear the emotional labor of maintaining family unity, managing the emotional boundary between celebration and mourning. Therefore, this banquet is not a hypocritical scene but one full of labor and effort.

Scene Four: Final Street Farewell

The final farewell scene is a distillation of the core emotional and theoretical elements of the movie. In one quiet street in Changchun, Wang frames and reframes Billi and her grandmother at increasing distances from each other. The presence of high-rise buildings squeezes the vertical perspective, thus giving a choked sense of oppression to Billi's inner turmoil. The composition of the scene reveals the inevitability of parting as the road is stretched with old apartment buildings, giving a sense of solidness as well as decay. In the last farewell, the grandmother is composed emotionally, with a confident smile and waving gesture, but Billi's body shows an episode of her struggle to remain composed.

This is a scene dominated by silence. As the ambient noise dies down and only the uneven breathing of Billi can be heard, Wang turns the sense of absence into an emotionally full atmosphere. According to filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, silence is not the opposite of language but a "way of constructing meaning" with its own peculiar grammar (87). Here, silence speaks of all that Billi cannot say: fear, guilt, attachment, and the unresolved tension of her diasporic identity.

Ahmed's theory helps us make sense of the moment Billi turns away: emotions build in her body, hunching her shoulders and quickening her breathing, generating the emotional residue produced by transnational separation (Ahmed 10-11). Hochschild also makes clear that this is emotional labor: Billi has to work to manage her bursting emotions, lest she cause her grandmother distress. Similarly, her grandmother's emotional stability may also be viewed as emotional labor. Her emotional stability, as well as her reassuring actions, may not necessarily be her natural emotional response; they are, in fact, actions aimed at producing emotional stability, which shields Billi from emotional distress. In this regard, therefore, emotional labor may be viewed



Fig. 3 | Final street farewell scene depicting emotional suppression, spatial distance, and silent intergenerational care. Screenshot from *The Farewell* (2019), directed by Lulu Wang.

as extending across generations, though in different ways, as Billi tries to deal with overwhelming emotions, while her grandmother's emotional stability is her way of holding the entire group together.

This scene nonetheless reflects Hall's theory: the formation of Billy's identity is neither an issue of pure Americanness nor pure Chineseness but is formed in the space in-between. This in-between space is poignantly expressed through the physical distance between the two women. Mohanty's framework assists our understanding when we recognize that such a farewell does not reflect emotional falsity or repression. Quite to the contrary, this is culturally specific love, expressed through repression as protection and silence as care (Mohanty 40–42).

As Billi turned back and left, tears formed in her eyes as she turned back again, which precisely pointed out the key theory of this study: the concept of dispersed identity proposed by Hall, which means being between two cultures and not being able to fully adapt to the simplicity and candor of the American people or the implicit self-restraint of the Chinese people, was vividly reflected in Billi; the concept of the flowing and transmitting of emotions between individuals and boundaries proposed by Ahmed was also reflected by the emotional distance between Ahmed's grandmother and granddaughter across screens and oceans; the theory of gendered emotional labor proposed by Hochschild was also reflected by the women's efforts to maintain the integrity of the family across generations and across the sea; the feminist theory with the emphasis on cultural specificity proposed by Mohanty also reminds us that the pressure faced by Billi was not the dilemma faced by every woman but was related to her experiences of immigration, filial piety, and inequality in the transnational family. Director Lulu Wang uses this film to prove that the emotional labor is not only the background of the story but the core and essence of the story itself.

3.2 Audience Reception Analysis

As Hochschild and Ahmed have suggested, emotional labor is determined by cultural structures, so the ways in which emotional labor are received would inevitably be precluded by culture. This paper will adopt a procedural grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 2008) to investigate how emotional labor is interpreted in different cultural contexts in the movie *The Farewell* using the review data from Douban (China) and Metacritic (U.S.). Because the research question involves cross-cultural differences, the review material on these two platforms cannot be combined. Each platform represents an independent cultural discourse system, replete with different moral vocabularies, emotional grammars, and evaluative frameworks. Thus, this study takes a method of dual-platform grounded theory analysis: reviews from the two platforms will be coded separately according to the three-step coding process in the emerging grounded theory-open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Lastly, the two core categories will be compared and integrated. The above structure avoids cultural confusion and ensures that the interpretive logics of each audience could naturally emerge before any cross-cultural comparison.

3.2.1 Data Collection

The website Douban.com is China's most influential user-generated film-review platform and thus has widely been employed for evaluating domestic and international films. By contrast, Metacritic aggregates U.S.-based critic reviews and comments from users, which is a discursive space due to Western expectations regarding authenticity, autonomy, and transparency. Using Python-based web scraping tools (see the Appendix for the full code, which includes line-by-line annotations explaining the scraping logic and data cleaning procedures), this study has gathered short reviews and long reviews related to *The Farewell* from both platforms. After duplicates, advertisements, and meaningless entries were removed, the final dataset includes:

Data Source	Sample Type	Sample Size	Character Count
https://Douban.com	User Review	1200 items	101,827
https://Metacritic.com	Critic Review	47 items	1,455
https://Metacritic.com	User Review	49 items	7,839

Table 1 | Dataset Overview for Douban and Metacritic Reviews.

Unlike Metacritic, which distinguishes between critic and user reviews, Douban mainly targets comments from the general public. As a result, all Douban reviews are treated as user-generated discourse in this study. The time period of the data varies from 2019 (the film's release date) to 2025. The reviews include positive, negative, as well as neutral reviews. The two corpora assembled together form the fundamental body of data used for grounded theory analysis.

3.2.2 Coding Framework

To examine how emotional labor is interpreted across different cultural contexts, this study adopts a grounded theory approach. Because Grounded theory is a systematic, qualitative research methodology used to develop theories directly from data rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss 1). Following the grounded theory methods described by Rao and Chen (2023), and Chen and Liu (2023), this study uses a rigorous three-step coding aimed at supporting the inductive development of interpretive categories from the discourse of the audience. The intention is not only to categorize the opinions but to reconstruct the cultural logics that are used by different audiences to interpret the film.

(1) Open Coding. The analysis begins with line-by-line coding of all reviews to extract substantive ideas, emotional expressions, cultural references, and evaluative judgments. This step yields first-level categories that remain closely anchored to the audience's own linguistic and conceptual repertoire. By postponing theoretical abstraction, open coding preserves the heterogeneity and nuance of early interpretive patterns.

(2) Axial Coding. The initial categories are then reorganized into higher-order conceptual clusters. At this stage, the analysis identifies convergences, contradictions, and implicit relationships—such as how ethical beliefs shape emotional responses, or how cultural assumptions frame aesthetic judgments. Axial coding thus transforms dispersed observations into coherent thematic structures.

(3) Selective Coding. Finally, each corpus is integrated around a core category that synthesizes the dominant interpretive logic of the cultural group. The core category functions as an organizing principle that explains how audiences resolve ethical tensions, interpret emotional labor, and negotiate cultural meaning within the film.

The following sections present the Douban and Metacritic results separately, allowing each audience's interpretive system to emerge on its own terms before the two are placed in dialogue in the cross-cultural comparison.

Initial Category	Original Records
Filial Piety and Ethical Debate	"Hiding the diagnosis from Grandma isn't deception—it's the gentle form of Chinese filial piety. My own family did the same when an elder got seriously ill."
	"I don't understand why the patient's right to know should be taken away. This isn't filial piety—it's just controlling."
Intergenerational Resonance	"When Nai Nai stuffed a red envelope into Billi's hand and nagged her about marriage, I instantly thought of my own grandma—I couldn't stop crying."
	"For those of us living abroad, this kind of farewell hits too close to home. Every return trip carries the fear that it might be the last time we see our elders."
Perception of Women's Emotional Labor	"Throughout the whole film, it's the aunts and the mother doing all the emotional patchwork—smoothing things over, keeping the lie together—while the men just drink and avoid responsibility. Too real."
	"Nai Nai's strength and the mother's quiet endurance are such accurate portraits of Chinese womanhood."
Cultural Authenticity of Details	"The old factory districts in Changchun, the drinking rituals at the wedding, the chatter among relatives—everything is incredibly authentic."
	"As someone from Northeast China, I can say the family dinner tone and atmosphere feel completely natural."
Narrative Pacing	"The pacing is too slow—the setup in the beginning was so long I almost fell asleep."
	"There's genuine emotion in the plainness. This slow rhythm actually matches how Chinese people express feelings."
Cross-Cultural Tension	"Billi's inner struggle is exactly the clash between Chinese and Western values—our whole generation understands that feeling of being torn apart."
	"Americans may see it as a lie, but for us it's a tacit form of protection within the family."
Acting and Emotional Impact	"Zhao Shuzhen's portrayal of Nai Nai is so vivid. That final waving scene is iconic."
	"Awkwafina's crying scenes have real depth—she conveys the internal struggle perfectly."
Reflection on Family Ethics	"The cohesion of this family rests entirely on the women. The men are practically absent."
	"Collectivism isn't about sacrificing individuals—it's about mutual care and enabling each other."
Recognition of Directorial Style	"Lulu Wang understands the subtle dynamics of Chinese families so well. Her restrained yet powerful visual language captures everything."
	"There's no forced sentimentality—this kind of emotional understatement is far more moving than melodrama."
Soundtrack and Visual Aesthetics	"The snowy Northeast landscapes and old streets are beautifully textured, and the soundtrack enhances the emotions perfectly."
	"The red tones of the wedding scenes contrast sharply with the emotional heaviness of the plot—it's brilliant."
Recommendation Intent	"You have to take your parents to see this—you'll understand your family's love better afterward."
	"It's not for people who want a dramatic plot, but perfect for anyone willing to sit quietly and feel family affection."
Critique of Plot Logic	"Holding a fake wedding just to gather the family feels far-fetched—this hardly happens in real life."
	"Billi's shift from resisting to accepting feels abrupt—the film doesn't set it up well enough."
Emotional Restraint and Release	"I held back tears the whole time, and only cried when Billi turned around at the end—so relatable."
	"This is exactly how Chinese emotions work—love is always hidden inside silence."
Intergenerational Communication Problems	"The older generation always hides bad news and shares only the good; the younger ones want honesty but fear hurting them—this is the helplessness of Chinese family love."
	"The distance between Billi and her mother is typical of many immigrant families."
Female Character Empathy	"The aunts running around organizing the wedding and comforting relatives—this quiet female strength is heartbreaking."
	"The mother has to care for her daughter overseas and the elders back home—it's such an impossible burden."

Table 2 | Douban Open Coding: Initial Categories and Representative Comments.

Main Category	Coding Percentage	Secondary Category	Connotation
Cultural and Ethical Interpretation	35%	Filial Piety Debate	Discussions surrounding the concealment of Nai Nai's diagnosis, reflecting core disagreements within Chinese family ethics about what constitutes filial responsibility.
		Cross-Cultural Conflict Interpretation	Analyses of differences between Chinese and Western norms regarding truth-telling, individual versus collective responsibility, and moral expectations.
		Family Ethics Reflection	Deeper reflections on family power structures, gendered divisions of labor, and intergenerational responsibilities within Chinese kinship systems.
Emotional Experience and Resonance	30%	Intergenerational Emotional Resonance	Emotional identification grounded in viewers' own family experiences, especially involving grandparent–grandchild and mother–daughter relationships.
		Perception of Women's Emotional Labor	Recognition of the emotional labor performed by female characters and its central role in sustaining family cohesion.
		Emotional Restraint and Release	Identification with "silent emotions," reflecting culturally specific modes of emotional expression in Chinese contexts.
		Intergenerational Communication Difficulties	Empathy toward the communication barriers between generations, often linked to viewers' own family dynamics.
Aesthetic Expression of the Film	20%	Cultural Detail Authenticity	Evaluation of the film's accurate representation of Chinese family settings, customs, and linguistic norms.
		Narrative Pacing Evaluation	Positive or negative feedback on the film's pacing and emotional buildup.
		Acting & Emotional Performance	Focus on the authenticity, emotional depth, and persuasive quality of the actors' performances.
		Recognition of Directorial Style	Appreciation of the director's narrative approach, visual language, and restrained emotional expression.
		Music & Visual Presentation	Evaluation of the film's visual texture, color palette, and the emotional atmosphere created by its score.
Value Judgments and Behavioral Intent	10%	Recommendation Intent	Viewers' inclination to recommend the film and their perceived appropriate audience groups.
		Critique of Plot Logic	Critical feedback regarding the plausibility of the plot and the coherence of character development.
Character Interpretation and Empathy	5%	Empathy Toward Female Characters	Emotional identification with the struggles and responsibilities of female characters such as the mother, aunts, and Nai Nai.
		Cross-Cultural Character Interpretation	Analyses of the identity struggles and cultural negotiations faced by diaspora characters such as Billi.

Table 3 | Douban Axial Coding: Main Categories, Subcategories, and Connotations.

3.2.3 Douban Coding Process

(1) Open Coding. After manually coding 1,200 Douban reviews, 15 preliminary categories were identified, which reflects how Chinese audiences interpret this film through the lens of family ethics, collective responsibility, cultural resonance, and emotional restraint. Representative Chinese comments were excerpted and translated. More importantly, the audience's response is not uniform. On issues such as filial piety and ethical controversies, people's views are even contradictory: some believe that concealing the truth from elders is out of ethical understanding and care, while others criticize this behavior as essentially a form of control. This internal cultural divergence reflects the internal debates surrounding the interpretation of emotional labor, and also echoes Mohanty's criticism of viewing non Western subjects as homogeneous entities. These responses do not constitute a single Chinese perspective, but rather indicate that even within the same social context, cultural significance itself is controversial and constantly being discussed.

(2) Axial Coding. The initial 15 categories were merged into 5 main categories and 16 subcategories. They are organized around a coherent logical chain, which link cultural ethics, emotional experiences, and value judgments.

(3) Selective Coding. The basic principle of selective coding is to first select a core category and then use it for integrating the different kinds of associations that have been sorted out in the process of axial coding. While selecting the core category, two major criteria should be considered for evaluation: first, the explanatory power of the category itself, and second, its frequency of occurrence; After comprehensive evaluation, it would be constructed as a central explanatory framework that runs throughout the whole picture, closely connecting cultural values, emotional responses, and behavioral tendencies. The key step is not to treat different categories as different themes, but to emphasize the analysis of the interaction of categories, and then sort out a whole and complete explanatory system in a logical manner.

3.2.4 Metacritic Coding Process

(1) Open Coding. The Metacritic dataset yielded 12 initial categories reflecting American audiences' emphasis on moral transparency, individual autonomy, psychological health, and cinematic craftsmanship. Representative excerpts include: The data set of the Metacritic provided 12 categories initially, which represented the dominant interpretive frames often linked to American audiences. These included the importance of moral transparency, individual autonomy, psychological well-being, and filmic craftsmanship. Although these categories are distinct from the data set of the Douban corpus, it is noteworthy that audience identity is not necessarily di-

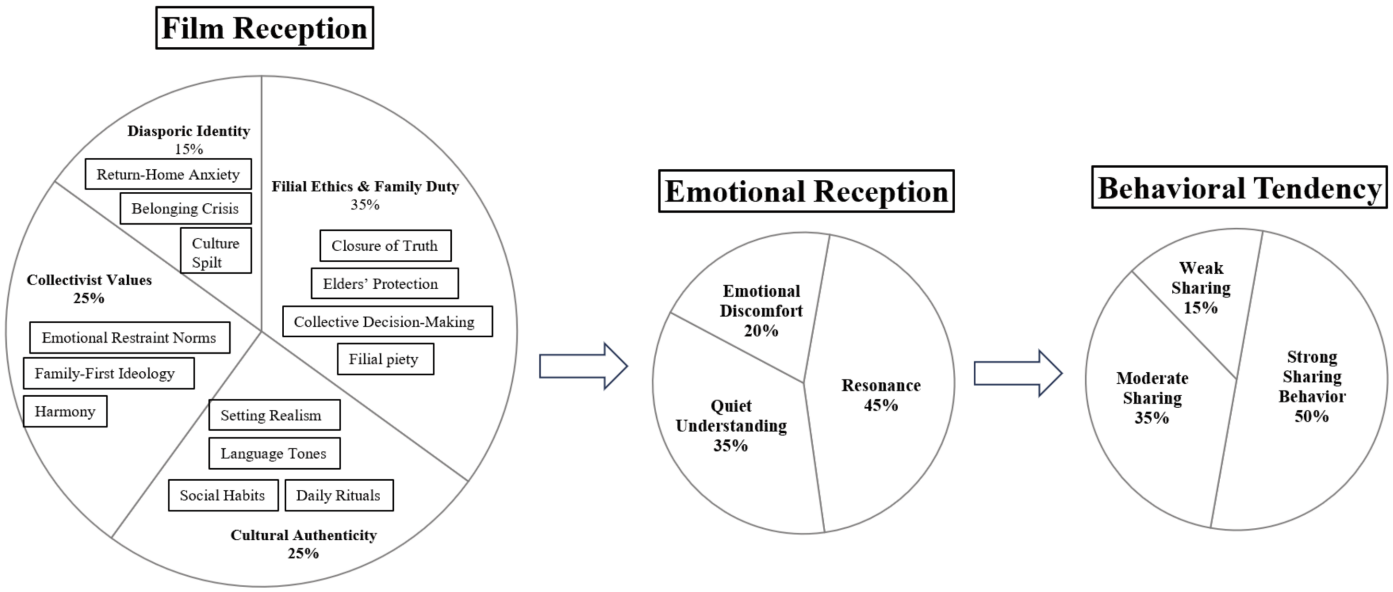

Figure 4 | A Sociocultural Mechanism of Douban Audience Reception: From Cultural Interpretation to Emotional and Behavioral Responses.

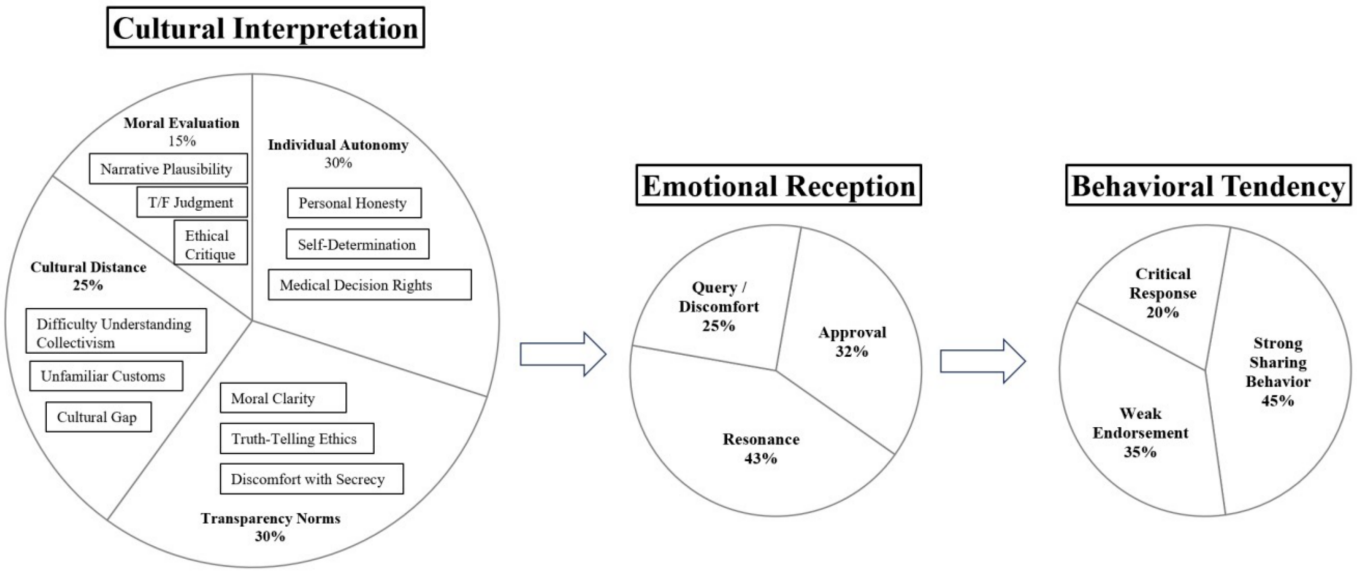

Figure 5 | A Sociocultural Mechanism of Metacritic Audience Reception: From Cultural Interpretation to Emotional and Behavioral Responses.

chotomous. Many audience members may have hybrid cultural perspectives due to transnational experiences.

(2) Axial Coding. The axial coding stage requires further localization of the initial categories to generate more directed and conceptual primary categories (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). We summarized and generated 5 main categories and 13 secondary categories (Table 3).

4. Findings and Discussion

This study integrates text analysis with grounded theory-inspired reception analysis in order to show that the phenomenon of emotional labor in *The Farewell* is a cinematic practice that is simultaneously a tactic and a cultural object of interpretation. Three findings came out of these two research methods: that emotional labor is a gendered practice that is not equitably divided, that emotional labor is made up of culturally-specific moral logics, and that the cultural ethics of this practice shift vastly when this film is placed within a national and a feminism-defined cultural context. This section will unify the film cinematic analysis with the audience analysis to showcase how emotional labor is manifested in the film and interpreted by different cultures.

From the perspective of film analysis, *The Farewell* articulates the externalization of emotional labor not as an event of personal emotions but as an unending endeavor of maintaining harmony within a transnational family. Again and again, it links these silent and suppressed bodily actions, omissions, and gaps with women as mother, aunt, daughter, and even grandmother. It is

Initial Category	Representative Original Reviews
Plot Content	"The little dramas and themes that emerge during the reunion... become more than the sum of its individual parts."
Cultural Authenticity	"Wang makes the family dynamics feel universally familiar while also presenting an authentic portrait of China."
Emotional Resonance	"I've seen 100 movies this year and this is my favorite... It will ring riotously true for anyone who knows the joys and agonies of a large, complicated family."
Acting Performance	"Awkwafina shines in Lulu Wang's deeply moving and autobiographic The Farewell."
Directorial Style	"Wang shows an assured grasp of tone, a pleasing eye for unforced composition."
Balance of Humor and Pathos	"The picture is also mischievously funny. Wang pirouettes along some tonal hairpins — in one scene, I guffawed in the midst of wracking sobs."
Moral Dilemmas	"The film taps into universal truths about the passage of time, the inevitability of loss, and how we prepare one another for it."
Cultural Differences	"In the US, the doctor bears legal responsibility to deliver the death verdict to you. In China, the news is usually delivered to their family member..."
Family Relationship Portrayal	"It's an incredibly satisfying meal of a film."
Visuals and Music	"Beautifully shot, well-acted... The music in the movie was excellent."
Recommendation Intent	"Go see this movie." / "I can't recommend it enough."
Critiques and Shortcomings	"The Farewell is so fixated on its principle problem that it doesn't allow its story or its characters to veer from it."

Table 4 | Metacritic Open Coding: Initial Categories and Representative Comments.

these women who invest and mediate emotions for family harmony. Thus, it becomes clear that instead of being an eventual representation of emotions, emotional labor becomes an unending and almost invisible task. Moreover, it becomes very essential here that rather than being an aberrant and pathological representation, it becomes an almost common practice embedded within culture and viewed as perpetually necessary for an intergenerational and transnational family. Such a distribution of genders can also be seen in terms of the lack of emotional labor by the male characters, who are shown as emotionally distant, avoidant, or peripheral in terms of the management of emotions. Moreover, it becomes very essential here that instead of being an aberrant and pathological representation, it becomes an almost common practice embedded within culture and viewed as perpetually necessary for an intergenerational and transnational family.

However, the meaning of the gendered emotional labor within the film context is not fixed, as it depends on interpretations made by various audience members. Analysis made from audience reception shows that despite the fact that the film uses similar expressive tools, mainly silence, concealment, and control, various audience members make interpretations within varied moral and emotional contexts.

As seen on Douban, a Chinese audience, understanding emotional labor would be instead from a collectivist ethical mind-set and sense of interpersonal obligation. In these regards, not disclosing the sick grandmother would not be viewed as deception but as safeguarding; silence would be understood as a message and emotional absence. Thus, women's emotional labor will always be necessary: it is burdensome, but also morally understandable and culturally normal within family life. Within the context of Douban, Chinese viewers' understandings of the central concealment of the film are often mediated by a broader discussion of filial piety and ethics. In the "Filial Piety and Ethical Debate" and "Cultural and Ethical Interpretation" sections of the site, there is no uniform support for the decision of the family to conceal Nai Nai's diagnosis; rather, there is an engagement with the ethics of the issue, within a broader context of cultural understandings of filial piety, ethics, and family well-being.

For example, one commentator offers the following: "To hide the diagnosis from Grandma isn't deception; rather, it's the gentle form of Chinese filial piety," while another commentator offers the following: "I don't understand why the patient's right to know should be taken away. This isn't filial piety; rather, it's controlling." These different understandings suggest that Chinese viewers are actively working through the different moral imperatives at play, rather than passively accepting a singular cultural imperative.

Main Category	Coding Percentage	Secondary Category	Connotation
Film Expression	30%	Plot Content	Presentation of the film's main narrative structure and storyline.
		Character Construction	The traits, identities, and narrative functions of the film's characters.
		Cultural Authenticity	The authenticity of the film's depiction of Chinese family life and cultural contexts.
Cinematic Technique and Aesthetics	20%	Thematic Core	The film's central themes, value orientations, and overarching message.
		Directorial Style	The director's use of scene transitions, editing choices, tonal control, and narrative strategies.
		Acting Performance	The performers' acting quality, expressiveness, and on-screen presence.
Production-Related Evaluation	5%	Director Evaluation	Comments on the director's prior work, stylistic tendencies, and filmmaking habits.
Emotional Reception	40%	Emotional Resonance	Feelings of identification, satisfaction, or deep empathy toward the viewing experience or thematic message.
		Compromise Understanding	Rational comprehension without full emotional agreement or satisfaction.
		Emotional Distress	Negative emotional reactions, dissatisfaction, or harm caused by the film's thematic expression.
Behavioral Tendencies	5%	Weak Communicative Behavior	Unwillingness to discuss or spread information about the film.
		Strong Communicative Behavior	Desire to discuss, share, and actively promote the film to others.

Table 5 | Douban Axial Coding: Main Categories, Subcategories, and Connotations.

What they have in common is the broader cultural context of the debate. Indeed, each of these commentators is engaging the broader cultural context of Chinese values of filial piety, the well-being of the family, and ethics of relationships when seeking to make sense of the ethical conundrum presented by the film. In the broader cultural context of the debate, the emotional labor of women is understood to be a culturally mediated concern.

By contrast, American critics on Metacritic analyze these same emotions with a more liberal, individualistic worldview, giving more weight to personal autonomy and transparency. By these standards, silence becomes repression and deception becomes a value judgment rather than an act of good will. Thus, because emotional labor becomes a potentially bad thing, it ceases to be recognized as a necessary act on behalf of a collective and becomes instead something that is irritatingly imposed on women. These reviews correspond with a more Western feminist perspective on emotions, giving primacy to equity with regards to the distribution of emotional burden. On the contrary, American reviews on Metacritic concentrate on the core conflict of the film in terms of individual autonomy, personal transparency, and psychological authenticity. The comments often mention honesty, the right to know, and the psychological cost of deception. Although it is not possible to determine the degree of agreement or disagreement of individual critics on such values through this categorization, it is possible to determine general patterns of discussion in the corpus and determine that American audiences might be more likely to discuss the plot of hiding and concealing in terms of individual rights and psychological authenticity rather than individual responsibility. Indeed, it is possible for individual critics to judge that the family's decision was well-meaning but wrong, or is it really protecting someone from the truth? Such judgments and evaluations do not necessarily reflect a shared Western feminist perspective but a set of shared values in terms of individual autonomy, evaluation, and transparency. In this context, it is possible for emotional labor, especially when it is associated with suppression and concealment, not necessarily to be associated with care but with imposition, and silence not necessarily associated with depth but emotional imposition. Although it is not possible for American audiences to share similar critical evaluations of the film in terms of emotional labor, it is possible for their general framework of discussion to be different and shift from relational ethics to individual rights.

The conclusion based on the comparison made above is that it's not a binary relationship based on "Eastern" and "Western" readings but illustrates instead that emotional labor itself can be known and understood only culturally and locally, as ways and expressions of emotions exist. The aesthetic control and decorum

Dimension	Chinese (Douban)	American (Metacritic)
Ethical frame	Collective responsibility	Individual autonomy
Core value	Protection through concealment	Authenticity through transparency
Emotional logic	Intergenerational care	Personal psychological integrity
Women's labor	Structural, normalized	Burdensome, ethically fraught
Silence	Communicative, meaningful	Ambiguous, repressive
View of deception	Benevolent	Morally conflicted

Table 6 | Cross-Cultural Divergence in Audience Interpretation: Douban vs. Metacritic.

shown within the film itself do not at all signify that it contains universalized meanings because instead, it incites differing reactions with regard to matters involving care and honesty, as well as gender and responsibilities. In short, as an international text itself, *The Farewell* contains meaningfully differing emotions with regard to cross-national viewing and generates distinct emotional responses across different cultural contexts.

As a whole, these results underscore an important theoretical finding of this research: it is necessary to be aware that emotional labor cannot be viewed as a notion that can be commonly understood, no matter how clearly it might be articulated as a cinematic fact. The cognition of emotional labor, value judgments, and morality are shaped by cultural histories, family ideologies, and feminist theories. By juxtaposing textual analysis with audience research data, it can be shown that gendered emotional labor not only occurs as a cinematic fact but also as an interactive process involving cinematic meaning and audience interpretation. Consequently, it highlights the importance and need for feminist cinematic analysis within culturally specific frameworks of emotions.

4.2 Limitations of Textual Cinematic Analysis Alone

While the textual analysis shows how the film *The Farewell* encodes a gendered emotional labor through gesture, silence, and spatial design, the findings of the grounded theory bring into view an intrinsic structural limitation within textual analysis itself: legibility of these cinematic strategies is not universally understandable across cultural contexts. More simply put, textual analysis can mention what aesthetic choices a film has made but cannot settle what meanings those choices will have across cultures. This perhaps is nowhere more salient than in the contrast between Chinese and American audience responses: whereas silence is a way of care with ethical import for Chinese viewers, the same silences are interpreted by many American viewers as ways of emotional avoidance or psychological dysfunction. This limitation can be seen particularly in the difference in audience response that emerges in the two data sets: whereas in one set silence and concealment are interpreted as care or relational responsibility, in another set they are interpreted as emotional avoidance or unethical practice. In that sense, this is not so much a misreading as it is a cultural difference in emotional norms—in China, emotional norms treat silence as a way to coordinate relationships, while in the West, emotional transparency is considered a moral imperative. Thus, textual analysis presumes the emotional signals of a movie have stable meanings that cannot predict the divergence in ethical interpretation when a movie crosses cultural boundaries.

Also, textual analysis depends on the assumption that the emotional signals of a film are universally understandable, while audience response data reveals an even deeper limitation: the emotions in a film are not universal categories but are rearranged along the moral and emotional infrastructures of the receiving culture. Thus, textual analysis of *The Farewell* cannot be anything but partial. It can describe strategies, but it cannot reveal the interpretive divergences those strategies generate. Comparing emotional responses to the same film across different cultural contexts, research finds the emotional framework of that film crystal clear in one culture and unstable or ethically questioned in another. For example, in the previous analysis of the film, gestures and expressions of the aunt during the banquet were considered a form of emotional labor, which helps in maintaining harmonious family relations. However, according to the responses received from the audience, gestures and expressions of the aunt during the banquet were subject to different ethical and emotional perceptions and understanding. Some of the audience perceived these gestures and expressions of the aunt as culturally significant expressions of care and love, while others were more inclined towards questioning these expressions and gestures of the aunt as emotional suppression and avoidance. Thus, this again proves the necessity of a dual-method approach and underlines that cross-cultural film study cannot be done using textual analysis alone.

4.3 Contributions to Transnational Feminist Film Studies

Through its methodological combining of textual analysis and audience reception theory, this study reveals the structural representation and interpretive consequences of gendered emotional labor in transnational films. This dual approach shows that emotional labor is meaningfully encoded not only in the form of the film itself but also in how audiences view and react to the film within particular cultural contexts-both in harmony and with discrepancies. On the other hand, reception alone cannot account for different interpretations apart from the cinematic cues or emotional grammar that audiences respond to. In drawing both these methods together, it is evident that emotional labor acts on levels of form, narration, cultural ethics, and audience cognition simultaneously.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to transnational feminist film studies by challenging the the assumption that the meaning and moral valuation of emotional labor are self-evident or consistent across cultural contexts.assumed universality of emotional labor's significance across cultural contexts. In its place, emotional labor appears as a culturally dense emotional economy informed by moral frames like collectivism, filial responsibility, liberal individualism, and immigrant negotiation. For Chinese audiences, emotional labor is rendered a relational imperative and a practice stabilizing the family in the face of death, migration, and

cultural fragmentation. For American audiences, emotional labor becomes a site of moral contestation, framed within moral frames that privilege authenticity and criticize the suppression of emotions. This contrast underlines the necessity of a feminist methodology, specifically the refraining from projecting a Western moral ethic onto non-Western emotional habits, for which Mohanty appealed in the name of contextualized, anti-colonial feminist analysis.

This article, finally, contributes to a new model according to which the emotional resonance of films across cultural boundaries is theorized. *The Farewell* demonstrates that transnational films sometimes bridge cultural differences and at other times expose them. They can create deep resonance among certain viewers while provoking strong moral dilemmas or interpretive conflicts. By specifying how gendered emotional labor is encoded, transmitted, and interpreted, this article outlines the complex dynamics that constitute the emotional culture circulation of films. More broadly, it demonstrates that any analysis of transnational cinema necessarily needs to address the cultural politics of emotional interpretation—demonstrating not only how emotions are represented but also their cultural interpretability, moral evaluation, and emotional experience among diverse viewer groups. Despite these contributions, this study also has a number of limitations. First, the data on the audiences is derived from two particular platforms, Douban and Metacritic, which may not necessarily provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse responses of audiences in a global context, particularly in terms of different linguistic, regional, or demographic groups. Second, although the coding is systematic, the nature of the research is interpretive in approach, which is subject to bias in terms of interpretation. Third, although this research highlights the importance of cultural differences in terms of interpretation, audiences are not necessarily defined or bounded in a strict sense, and audiences may have a hybrid or transnational identity that is not necessarily captured in this approach.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study hence shows that an understanding of gendered emotional labor in *The Farewell* requires an analytical move across textual form, theoretical interpretation, and cultural reception. Conducting textual analysis through a theoretical dialogue between Hall, Ahmed, Hochschild, and Mohanty, the study demonstrates that, through her cinematic strategies like silences, scene composition, body language, and withheld plot details, Wang articulates emotional labor as a gendered practice deeply influenced by culture that shapes the structure of transnational Chinese families. Yet, the meaning of such aesthetic choices cannot be assumed to apply universally, as reception analysis will show. Comparing reviews from Douban and Metacritic with a grounded theory approach, the article shows that the emotional cues of the film are mediated by different moral languages, respectively informed by Chinese collectivist ethics and American liberal individualist norms.

While this dual approach underlines the parallel operation of textual presentation and audience interpretation, it also shows how their interaction reveals limitations of any single analytical perspective. An interpretation that relies purely on textual interpretation cannot account for the interpretive gaps arising in different cultural contexts, while a reliance on reception analysis alone cannot explain why the narrative language of the film generates such gaps. It is only through bringing together form and reception that emotional labor can appear both as a performative strategy and as one of cultural intermediary processes; in this way, emotional labor shows how gender, culture, and emotion meet in transnational cinema.

In so doing, this research contributes a new perspective to the scholarship of transnational feminist film: rather than emotional labor being a stable concept, it suggests that there is an emotional economy always culturally modulated, whose meaning shifts as films are circulated across national borders. *The Farewell* becomes, accordingly, a site of competing emotional cultures, gendered expectations, and immigrant identities. This paper argues for a more relational, contextualized methodology in global film studies—one in which attention to gendered emotional labor would not simply be thematically identified but used as a cross-cultural heuristic device in order to reveal how emotion is structured, evaluated, and contested in a globalized world. Generally, this article provides a double research design, which includes text close reading and grounded theory-based analysis of the audience. This is especially useful in the analysis of films dealing with the themes of cross-cultural communication, films dealing with family, caregiving, and gendered labor, and films dealing with the themes of morality, which can be interpreted in a number of ways in different cultures. For instance, the film “Minari” (2020) is about the relationships between the generations in Korean-American families, the film “The Thief Family” (2018) shatters people’s innate understanding of family, caregiving, and morality, and the book “Drinking, Eating, Men and Women” (1994) is about the conflicts between the generations and cultures in the ways families gather and engage in other rituals. It is through the analysis of the ways in which films express emotions in cultures and the ways in which audiences understand these emotions that the researcher is able to look beyond the pursuit of universal meaning and instead focus on the ways in which gender, emotion, and culture are intertwined and interpreted in the audiences of global films.

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For a full list of references, visit WUJUR.org.

Filmography

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