‘Finding Yingying’: Chinese pain and the empathy deficit

What one mother’s grief can teach us about our common humanity.

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“You look like my daughter,” Yingying’s mother, Lifeng, tells the filmmaker Jenny Shi. Lifeng is hunched over a wooden bench in her home in Nanping, China, the bare wall behind her faintly out of focus. She turns and looks into the camera, her voice tinged with melancholy if not also a hint of spite: “I wish my daughter could come back like you.”

The disappearance of and search for Yingying Zhang (章莹颖 Zhāng Yíngyǐng) is the subject of Finding Yingying, a documentary by Shi. Yingying, a 26-year-old Fujian native and visiting scholar at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, disappeared within weeks of arriving on campus and was never found. Through interviews and reporting, the film offers a poignant and devastating portrayal of the many individuals who knew Yingying — from her parents to her boyfriend to her colleagues — and whose lives Yingying’s brutal murder indelibly altered.

But of all the people in Yingying’s life, we feel for Lifeng the most. While the death of a child is widely considered the most painful kind of loss, death is a taboo subject in Chinese culture, and the death of a child in particular is not typically talked about openly. The most common phrase to express condolences in China — 节哀顺变 jié'āi shùnbiàn — literally translates as “you should restrain your sadness and adjust to the change.”

This proclivity to suppress rather than express grief is manifested throughout the film. When recounting the pain of discovering that Yingying had died, Guofang, Yingying’s colleague, smiles before allowing herself to cry. At the arraignment of Brendt Christensen, Yingying’s suspected killer, the family is warned by their attorney not to make a scene in the courthouse because “if you make a scene, you might get deported.” Even Jenny Shi tells us in an aside: “I don’t know how to comfort Yingying’s mother when she talks about her daughter.” She explains that Yingying’s family and relatives have also not shared much about the case out of
concern for her health.

But whereas the rest of the family is more reserved in their on-screen grieving, Lifeng is just the opposite. So distraught was Lifeng that, in the immediate aftermath of Yingying’s disappearance, she could not bring herself to go to Illinois to search for her missing daughter. When she does travel to America for Brendt Christensen’s arraignment, she breaks down frequently. We see her pain manifest in the way she mourns the loss of her daughter without restraint. In the car ride from the airport, she asks between sobs if they can find the suspect’s mother: “We are both mothers and have the same feelings...She knows how hard it is to raise a child.” Her husband responds by telling her to calm down, fearing that “if we lose our heads, everything is lost.”

Lifeng, more than anyone else in the documentary, stakes her hope in the power of empathy. “Americans won’t give up on my daughter, will they?” she asks Jenny, after Yingying’s trial is delayed for over a year. She is unfazed at how long the process takes, only that if she can somehow make people understand the pain she feels at having lost Yingying, she could convince even the suspect’s own mother to indict her son. Putting her faith in the empathy of the American jurors — in their ability to understand and “have the same feelings” that she herself is experiencing — Lifeng believes that justice for Yingying and her family will be served.
For the family, justice is nothing short of the death penalty for their daughter’s suspected killer; Yingying’s father reiterates that Christensen “has to pay for what he did.” In China, where thousands of people are reportedly executed every year, there isn’t the same moral quandary over the death penalty as in the U.S. On the first day of the trial, the defense team makes the startling confession that Christensen had in fact killed Yingying. The details of the murder are so horrific that the filmmaker Jenny Shi said she “could barely sit through the trial.” After torturing and sexually assaulting Yingying, Christensen eventually decapitated her and left her body in a dumpster. While his guilt was all but certain, there was still the question of the penalty. The family remained optimistic: surely something that gruesome and evil would merit death?

During the penalty phase of the trial, Lifeng was so worried that her emotions
would jeopardize the trial that she watched a livestream in the courthouse instead of being present in the courtroom. In the end, the result wasn’t what the family had hoped: Christensen’s punishment was life in prison. Xiaolin, Yingying’s boyfriend, summed up his frustration with the verdict by saying that in America, he felt like he, too, could “kill anyone, with all sorts of cruel measures...and not need to die for it.”

In the West, to a certain extent, we equate expressing vulnerability with relatability. Chinese families — like Yingying’s — have modes of grief that can be distinct, the result of a different set of values, beliefs, and attitudes. But without fully understanding the cultural context, it’s possible to write off this response to tragedy as unnatural or wrong and not treat it with the same level of gravity. While it’s impossible to know the exact reasons the jury did not vote to sentence Christensen to death, I can’t help but wonder if the decision stems from something else: an inability to interpret Chinese pain.

This issue is particularly striking in 2020, the year of Finding Yingying’s release, at a time when the United States is still reeling from a global pandemic that has killed more than 300,000 Americans. In the early days of the pandemic, Chinese Americans were among the first to understand the severity of the virus; bolstered by news from China, they procured and shipped PPE to assist friends and family in Wuhan and took precautions themselves. But as visible scapegoats, Chinese Americans attracted xenophobia and racism, in some cases enduring verbal and physical attacks.

But the greatest lack of empathy was reserved for the people of China. Images and stories of Chinese people facing lockdowns, supply shortages, and over-capacity at hospitals were met with condemnation as much as compassion. Western politicians, led by the U.S., escalated their attacks on China, criticizing the Chinese government’s initial attempts to downplay the severity of the virus — which, while likely fallacious, was in line with scientific understanding that China
valid, fails to recognize the extraordinary sacrifices and contributions that Chinese scientists have made to our understanding of the pandemic. Old stereotypes were reignited and served to further dehumanize. As a way to heighten cultural differences, Chinese people were lambasted for cultural practices that framed them as uncivilized, barbaric “others” who are more at risk of contracting dangerous diseases.

As was the case with Ebola and SARS before it, the public tends to ignore the fears and traumas experienced by immigrant communities that see epidemics unfolding in their origin countries. Instead, more attention was paid to the “draconian” methods China used to contain the virus and the pervasive attitude that “it won’t happen here.” Even though hundreds of people had already died, and the trajectory of the virus was clear, many in the West didn’t take it seriously until it landed on our shores. We did not heed the warnings. And even now, rather than take responsibility for our collective lack of preparedness and foresight, some politicians and media outlets continue to blame China, all while undermining the suffering of victims.

Washington Post journalist Emily Rauhala summed up this conspicuous lack of empathy best when she wrote: “One of the most painful lessons of this crisis is the extent to which America cannot or will not identify with Chinese pain. Every horror that is happening here happened first in Wuhan. We covered it. Many people did not care.” Amy Zhang went a step further in The Atlantic: “I was not ready for the level of denial, nonchalance, and arrogance that suggested American bodies were somehow immune to the same virus that sent Asia and Europe reeling.”

The reality, of course, is that we share the same pain, even though at times we seem incapable or unwilling to empathize with each other. The rhetoric of polarization between the U.S. and China prevents cooperation in the face of a global scourge, collaboration that is needed if we are to emerge from this crisis with resilience. Stigmatizing a people or a country does nothing to contribute to the fight against health emergencies. And yet, at a certain point we became incapable of understanding grief that is not our own. Was Lifeng wrong to pin her hopes of
understanding grief that is not our own. Was Lifeng wrong to pin her hopes of justice for her daughter’s murder on the empathy of Americans?

In a fireside chat with Serica, Jenny Shi described the struggle of making a Chinese story matter to and resonate with a Western audience, especially in such deeply polarized times. “Everyone can relate to this story,” she said. “A young, talented woman who moves to a foreign place to chase her dreams. That’s universal. But so is the pain of parents who lost a beloved daughter.”

And while the pain of losing a child is universal, being able to empathize with someone’s specific pain is not. Kaiser Kuo unpacks the idea of empathy into two camps: emotional empathy is the kind nearly all of us come equipped with: the intuitive and innate ability to “get” the emotions that others are experiencing. Cognitive, or informed, empathy, however, goes deeper. It requires knowing something about the object of your empathy in order to experience true understanding. “Attaining informed empathy is inherently about learning. After all, to see the world out the eyes of another, one has to learn something about the historical forces that shaped that other, about their values, beliefs, and habits of mind, about their day-to-day experience and much more. The task is greater still when the intended object of that empathy is an entire civilization.”

This way of seeing the world is difficult but increasingly necessary. Pope Francis, in a New York Times op-ed, extolled the need for empathy: “To come out of this pandemic better than we went in, we must let ourselves be touched by others’ pain.” We have an opportunity to rethink our priorities — our own values, beliefs, and habits of mind — and commit to act in a way that celebrates our shared humanity. Pope Francis went on to write: “The pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity.” And while the U.S. is still struggling to empathize with its own pain, this sentiment is especially true of reimagining and mending our severely strained relationship with China.

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In the penultimate scene of Finding Yingying, Yingying’s family set up a meeting with Terra Bullis, Brendt Christensen’s ex-girlfriend, who helped the FBI collect secret audio recordings that eventually led to his arrest. She wanted to read the family a letter she wrote in Mandarin, a language that she’d studied in high school, as a way to express her condolences. “Every time I was afraid, I thought about your love for Yingying,” she says in Mandarin. “I would do everything I could for you... Although we are from different cultures, your love for Yingying is still visible to me.”

For any white foreigner who has ever lived in China, the family’s response could almost be a punchline. “I could understand her,” Yingying’s brother says. “She spoke so well.” Yingying’s father adds: “How did she learn Mandarin like that?” Even during this tender moment, there seems to be a suppression or compartmentalization of grief; rather than connecting with her words, the dominant response is disbelief that Terra, a white American, can speak Chinese.

But then Lifeng steps in. “You are the same as Yingying,” she says, her eyes full of tears. “You are willing to help others. [Christensen] hurt Yingying. If no one had acted, he would have hurt more people. So you are very brave.”

It is by no means a foregone conclusion that the ex-girlfriend of a victim’s killer would speak to the family of the victim, nor that the family would want to hear what she has to say. But, especially in a time of so much mutual distrust, it offers a vision for what could be if we relinquished our own prejudices and learned to see each other as human beings once again. Terra expresses informed empathy in wanting to understand a foreign place better through language. And although Terra comes from a very different culture than her own, Lifeng sees in her the same generosity of spirit and kind-heartedness as her daughter.

After she reads the letter, Terra, who is much taller than Lifeng, bends down to give Lifeng a hug. Terra wraps her arms around Lifeng while Lifeng pats Terra on the back. They are each enacting their own rituals, expressing grief in different ways. But the empathy they share in that moment is the same.