

Short synopsis

Every spring, China's cities are plunged into chaos, as all at once, a tidal wave of humanity attempts to return home by train. It is the Chinese New Year. The wave is made up of millions of migrant factory workers. The homes they seek are the rural villages and families they left behind to seek work in the booming coastal cities. It is an epic spectacle that tells us much about China, a country discarding traditional ways as it hurtles towards modernity and global economic dominance.

Last Train Home, an emotionally engaging and visually beautiful debut film from Chinese-Canadian director Lixin Fan, draws us into the fractured lives of a single migrant family caught up in this desperate annual migration. Sixteen years ago, the Zhangs abandoned their young children to find work in the city, consoled by the hope that their wages would lift their children into a better life. But in a bitter irony, the Zhangs' hopes for the future are undone by their very absence. Qin, the child they left behind, has grown into adolescence crippled by a sense of abandonment. In an act of teenage rebellion, she drops out of school. She too will become a migrant worker. The decision is a heartbreaking blow for the parents. In classic cinema verité style, *Last Train Home* follows the Zhangs' attempts to change their daughter's course and repair their ruptured family. Intimate and candid, the film paints a human portrait of the dramatic changes sweeping China. We identify with the Zhangs as they navigate through the stark and difficult choices of a society caught between old ways and new realities. Can they get ahead and still undo some of the damage that has been done to their family?

Long Synopsis

Every spring, China's main cities are plunged into chaos, as all at once, a tidal wave of humanity attempts to return home by train. It is the Chinese New Year. The wave is made up of millions of migrant factory workers. The homes they seek are the rural villages and families they abandoned to seek wages in the booming cities. This brief holiday is their one opening out of the suffocating reality of the factories; a fleeting chance to reconnect with a world they left behind. It is an epic spectacle that tells us much about China, a country discarding its traditional ways as it hurtles towards modernity and global economic dominance. In *Last Train Home*, an emotionally engaging and visually beautiful debut film from Chinese-Canadian director Lixin Fan, we are drawn into the fractured lives of a single migrant family caught up in the movement between city and countryside, both driven and damaged by economic realities beyond their control. The film opens with unsettling, incomprehensible scenes: crowded, crying, shouting, desperate people waiting for trains which may or may not arrive. Tickets are limited because of astronomical demand, and people are determined to return home at any cost. Visibly frightened policemen seem to have only the most tenuous control over a situation which may boil over at any moment.

The film shifts focus allows us to experience the massive migration through the eyes of a middle-aged couple: the Zhangs. Clutching their belongings, the Zhangs manage to cram into a nightmarish train in Guangzhou and make a 50-hour arduous journey across the country to be reunited with their children. 16 years ago they left their ancestral village and infant daughter to find work in the city. They have toiled in poorly ventilated, dimly lit garment factories, consoled by the hope that the wages they earn will pay for the education of their children and lift them into a better life. In a bitter irony, these desperate hopes for the future are threatened by the couple's very absence. Qin, the child they left behind to be raised by her grandmother, has grown into adolescence crippled by a sense of abandonment. Alienated from faraway parents she hardly knows and resentful of their advice, she drops out of school in an act of teenage defiance. Lured by the money glow of the city, she too will become a migrant worker. The decision is a heartbreaking blow for the parents. In classic cinema verité style, *Last Train Home* observes the Zhangs' attempts to change their daughter's course and repair their ruptured family.

Qin is one of millions of kids growing up without one or both parents. All across rural China, villages appear to be missing a generation; families have been cut in two. Grandparents tend the fields and care for the children while parents work in the cities and send their wages home. China's stunning economic growth depends on uprooting and exploiting cheap labour from the countryside. The result is divided families, uneducated children and a social instability that clashes with the deeply-felt family values of China's traditional culture. The Zhang family of *Last Train Home* is a microcosm of a society caught between old ways and new realities.

Against this backdrop, Qin's teenage rebellion takes on a special significance. She is rejecting not only her family's wishes, but the old-world virtue of self-sacrifice that shaped them. In the new era, money and the freedom it offers replaces family as the prime motivation. As we watch Qin shift from gathering crops, to sewing clothes in a factory, to serving drinks in a neon bar, we share in the confusion that rapid change has brought to China. It is a confusion and frustration that is echoed by other characters in the film, who struggle to understand their lives as part of the larger forces at play, as China's factories churn out cheap clothes, toys and electronics for a global demand.

Intimate and candid, *Last Train Home* humanizes the cost of the changes sweeping China. Through it all, we identify with the parents as they navigate through stark and difficult choices. Can they get ahead and still undo some of the damage done to their family? The tone is both tense and melancholy but not hopeless. As we watch Qin and her young friends giggling like typical teenagers in the factory dorm, faint hope seems to flicker that some way out of the crushing cycle may be found through the fresh energy and attitude of China's youth.

An introduction to the Zhang family

Zhang Changhua (father)

Born in a remote rural village in Sichuan province, Changhua has been working in Guangzhou factories with his wife for 17 years. He has allowed the director and his crew complete and intimate access to the harsh reality of the couple's urban life. Migrant workers like the Zhangs are second-class citizens in China. Despised by the city's residents, they travel far to take on the growing economy's dirtiest and most difficult jobs for very low pay. China's household registration system excludes them from public healthcare and social welfare; their kids cannot attend public schools in the cities. They live in poor conditions and face daily discrimination.

Driven by a need to return and see his children, Changhua pays triple the usual price for a coveted train ticket that will take him on a multi-day ordeal across China, a year's savings and belongings in tow. As poor as the Zhangs are, they attempt to indulge their children with toys and money as a way to make up for the years of separation. But Changhua will find it very hard to overcome or accept the rebellious attitude of a teenage daughter he no longer recognizes.

Zhang Qin (daughter)

Qin is the eldest of the Zhangs' two children. 17 years old at the time of filming, she has been raised by her grandmother in the family's ancestral village. Under China's laws, she and her brother have been unable to accompany their parents, lacking the urban residency status that would entitle them to attend public school in the city. Qin can only see her parents once a year during the New Year. Sullen and resentful, she is convinced that her parents care more about making money than they do about her. She cannot forgive them.

Qin's village life is simple and revolves around subsistence farming and the local school. Lured by the promise of money and an exciting city life, she will quit school against her parents' wishes, traveling to Guangzhou to join the throngs of migrant workers in the factories. Here she begins working 14-hour days for a 5\$ wage, living in a 12-person dorm. Qin is typical of rural teenage dropouts in China, where at least one third of the 120 million migrant workers are woman aged 17 to 25. Naively, she comes to believe making money is more important than going to school in today's society, though the new Chinese dream excludes migrant workers who have little chance of escaping their status. At the film's end, Qin's future path is uncertain.

Chen Suqin (mother)

Early in the film, with great difficulty, Chen recounts how she left her newly-born daughter behind to accompany her husband and seek work in the city years ago. She has not seen her children in 3 years. Wracked by guilt, she admits to the director, "I know I haven't been a good mom, but I have to do what I have to do." *Last Train Home* documents her desperate desire to connect with her estranged daughter and steer her towards a better future outside the cycle of family separation and poverty. In the film's final scenes, she will leave her husband to labour alone without her, returning to village life in the hopes of preventing their son from following in his sister's footsteps.

The Zhang family represents countless other Chinese families whose relationships and values have been shattered by frantic economic growth in the era of globalization.

Director's Statement:

I used to work at TV stations in China. During those days I traveled to different parts of the county. The sharp contrast between the lives in cities and countryside always truck me. Submerged under the glamour of the modern metropolis, the poverty in the vast rural area is overwhelming. As I traveled, I started to focus on the migrant workers, whom I believe have contributed the most to China's prosperity but benefited the least. Aside from many hardships in life, they also have to bear constant separation from their families who are left behind. I decided to document the lives of this group in a unique position in China (and the world's) history.

The annual migrant exodus between cities and countryside during the week of the Chinese New Year provided me a perfect background for the film to closely examine the plight of the workers. The migrant Zhang's family story speaks for millions. Though their story, the film scrutinizes social inequality raised in a nation's industrial endeavor, and how the process is affected by globalization on both a social and humanistic level. By observing the fate of one family, the smallest and seemly stable cell in a fast evolving society, I hope to articulate the complication between a nation's ambition to raise and it impact on culture, society and individual.

On a cultural level, Confucian value of filial piety (respect for elders and ancestors) has long played a big role in Chinese lives. Being away from one's family was never encouraged, but a changing society shifted the value toward a pragmatic approach of bettering one's material life. Parents work away from home; they send all savings to the grandparents and kids. Sadly, providing material comfort alone does not translate into filial affection. Without parental presence and emotional support for the left-behind children, they do not connect or sympathize with their parents, as the gap between them can widen into an irreparable split.

On a national level, China is dashing to become a richer country, should tradition, morality, and humanity be drowned in a world of tireless rumbling factories is the question we should ask. For a government, to keep the fine balance between the economic development and the welfare of all people is the ultimate challenge in a time of change. In Taoism, we know that in nature, opposites must coexist harmoniously; a balance of opposites creates the best situation for harmony and calm. This is what we hope for the future.

Q & A with director Lixin Fan

Q: Why did you pick the plight of migrant workers in China as the subject of your first film? Has this issue touched your own life in some way?

A: I was born to an average family. My father was a college professor and my mother was an accountant. I went to university in my hometown, so I never actually had a personal experience of migrating. Back in the days at CCTV when I traveled, I was constantly consternated and often grieved by the shocking poverty and misery across the country's vast rural land, submerged under the glamour of the modern metropolis. I started to realize that the country's millions of migrants, the very contributors to today's prosperity, were denied many basic social necessities. They have to bear this great grief of constant separation from their loved ones. I decided I had to make a film to document this unique group against the backdrop of a changing country.

Q: How did you find your subjects? Was it hard to convince the family to be on camera?

A: In the city of Guangzhou I visited over 30 factories. They make everything there: toys, garments, electronics, you name it. I just strolled around these factory neighbourhoods and talked to the workers I met. They are generally nice but also cautious about speaking to strangers. In an ever-shifting population of migrants, mutual trust takes time to gain. I eventually met the Zhang couple. In the beginning, they were cautious about discussing their family lives, but I revisited them many times in the following weeks and we became friends. Eventually they agreed to the shooting. I felt very lucky to know them and was most grateful for their kindness and openness with me and the crew. They were so generous to let us enter every part of their lives for years. Our friendship grew as time went by. The crew call the man "brother Zhang" and his wife "sister Chen". We were like one big family, trudging through factory life.

Q: Were you ever tempted to put down the camera and help the Zhangs resolve the difficult issues that were happening right in front of your eyes?

A: I guess this is the ultimate question that every documentary filmmaker faces at some point. The choice is always difficult. Like I said, one reason I wanted to make this film was to raise awareness and better the lives of Chinese peasants. There will be moments when an individual's well-being is challenged in the process. For example, when the father hit the girl, should I have put down the camera or should I have captured this emotional moment to give the film a stronger narrative to reach a larger audience and eventually create changes? In such a conflict of ethics versus professionalism, everyone is challenged to make a sensible decision. I would choose the greater good but, very importantly, not at the cost of harm. The moment the father hit the daughter, I was in another room, my cameraman was shooting. I heard the shouting and came to the scene, and went into the frame to calm everyone down. The Chinese believe the world we live in is not a world of black and white. As the Tao's yin and yang argument explains: every action creates a counter action as a natural, unavoidable movement. Also, as the Taoijitu sign shows, there is black in white, and there is also white in black.

Q: Why do you think China has this massive migrant community?

A: The migration of the peasant work force started in the early 80's when the country first opened its economy. The influx of foreign investment created numerous factory towns in the southern costal regions. A soaring demand for labour lured millions out of their farmland to work in factories. Also with the loosening of the country's long-standing household registration system, people started to move around to find opportunities to better their lives. A low wage and lack of rights prevents them from bringing their families from the villages to the cities, even after decades of work.

Q: What region have most workers gone to, and from where have they come?

A: The general trend of migration is from the undeveloped western part of the country toward the more developed eastern and southern coastal areas. People from densely populated provinces such as Henan, Sichuan, Hubei and Hunan tend to leave their homes to find work in big cities across the country.

Q: Do you think the transportation system in China can be improved, and how?

A: Improving the country's overall transportation system is on Beijing's priority list. That being said, the Spring Festival problem is more related to social policies than the transportation system. The fact is, no matter how many roads you build, it's just impossible to transport such a large amount of passengers all at once in one direction. A more rational solution is the implementation of labour law, granting the migrant workers the social care and support they deserve, allowing their families to move to the cities. China has set a goal to urbanize half of its 1.3 billion population by 2020, and 70% by 2050.

Q: How has the phenomenon of migrant workers affected traditional Chinese family values?

A: It's true that the Confucian virtue of filial piety has long played a big role in Chinese lives. Being away from one's family was never encouraged by traditional values. Now the changing society has shifted toward a more pragmatic judgment and the bettering of one's material life. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the Chinese are losing their traditional values completely. For example, in the film, the parents worked away from home but they sent all their savings to their parents and kids. I think that although the way of life has transformed along with economic changes, deeper values still remain.

Q: Who has influenced your artistic style?

A: I admire Chinese film director Jia Zhangke and his work. His calm, meticulous, sensitive and abstract way of looking at changing China from a humanist point of view in a greater historical context gave me a lot of inspiration. He uses landscape and environment to define the subject matter. I like the way he explores the relationships between plain individuals against the greater backdrop of contemporary Chinese society. I also learned a lot from my good friend, Yung Chang, the director of *Up The Yangtze*.

Q: In making this film, what have you learned which is most precious?

A: One thing I have learned is that a candid relationship between the filmmaker and the subject is essential to making a strong and truthful representation of life. During the production, the crew and the subjects talked about everything together. I sensed as a filmmaker that you can't only think of what you can get from your subject, you have to share your own ideas and emotions. Many times, I got great footage when I felt I was with my subjects in their emotional world. I live the moment with my subjects, my heart feels their pain, their love, their sorrow and courage. But at the same time, my mind still keeps my rational thinking.

EyeSteelFilm is a documentary film and interactive media company dedicated to using cinema as a catalyst for social and political change. Our mandate is to create and distribute films that empower people who are ignored by mainstream media.

EyeSteelFilm was founded by making films with the homeless community. Daniel Cross's gritty street trilogy (***Danny Boy***, 1993; ***The Street: a film with the homeless***, 1996; ***SPIT: Squeegee Punks in Traffic***, 2002) chronicled a generation of Canadians lost to social funding cuts, political apathy, alcoholism and drug use. These films provided a template for using engaged cinéma-vérité and interactivity for empowerment and change. With ***SPIT: Squeegee Punks in Traffic***, the camera was given to a street kid named Roach, who at the time was living on the streets of Montreal. Over the three years it took to make the film, Roach transformed from drug-addicted street kid to filmmaker and has gone on to direct the documentaries ***Roachtrip***, ***Punk le Vote!***, and the upcoming ***Les Tickets***. Our website ***HomelessNation.org*** continues to help those in the homeless community tell their own stories.

EyeSteelFilm has branched out to make films on diverse, compelling topics, such as the multiple award-winning ***Rip! A Remix Manifesto***, a look at remixing and copyright in the digital age; ***Taqwacore***, about punk rock muslims; teens coming of age in a small Inuit village (***Inuuvunga I am Inuk I am Alive***); and a series of films chronicling modern life in China (***Bone***, 2005; ***Chairman George***, 2006; ***Up the Yangtze***, 2007). ***Up the Yangtze*** grossed close to 1.5 million dollars in North American box office, one of the year's top documentary releases. The film also won dozens of awards, such as the Genie (Canada's Oscar) for Best Documentary.

Over the years, EyeSteelFilm has collaborated with a wide range of partners including: The National Film Board of Canada, CBC, CTV, BBC, ZDF/ARTE, PBS and ITVS. In 2009, EyeSteelFilm was listed as a Realscreen magazine "Global 100" company.

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