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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

LAST TRAIN HOME

A FILM BY LIXIN FAN

Every spring, China's cities are plunged into chaos as 130 million migrant workers journey to their home villages for the New Year's holiday. This mass exodus is the world's largest human migration—an epic spectacle that reveals a country tragically caught between its rural past and industrial future.

Working over several years in classic verité style Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Lixin Fan (with the producers of the award-winning hit documentary *Up the Yangtze*) travels with one couple who have embarked on this annual trek for almost two decades. Like so many of China's rural poor, Zhang Changhua and Chen Suqin left behind their two infant children for grueling factory jobs. Their daughter Qin—now a restless and rebellious teenager—both bitterly resents their absence and longs for her own freedom away from school, much to the utter devastation of her parents. Emotionally engaging and starkly beautiful, *Last Train Home's* intimate observation of one fractured family sheds light on the human cost of China's ascendance as an economic superpower.

LAST TRAIN HOME

AWARDS AND FESTIVALS



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, Suqin 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 struck 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 seemingly stable cell in a fast evolving society, I hope to articulate the complication between a nation's ambition to raise and its 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.

–Lixin Fan, October 2009

Q&A WITH DIRECTOR LIXIN FAN

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?

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.

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

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.

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?

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.

Why do you think China has this massive migrant community?

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.

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

The general trend of migration is from the undeveloped western part of the country toward the more developed eastern and southern costal 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.

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

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.

What do you think of cross-generation care (i.e. grandparents caring for grand kids)? How does this trend impact the new generation?

Grandparents tend to spoil little children because nowadays most families have only one child. Because these kids are less disciplined on their grandparents' watch, they became what we call "little emperors". It's a good and bad thing. The new generation definitely have more freedom to think and do what they want, which may translate into a positive force to change the country. On the other hand, these spoiled little emperors and empresses often bear discouraging qualities like a lack of strong will, being inconsiderate to others, and the like.

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

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.

Who has influenced your artistic style?

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*.

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

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.

BIOS

LIXIN FAN - DIRECTOR

Lixin Fan was born in China, growing up as his country was modernizing and rapidly integrating with the world. Starting off as a journalist with the national television broadcaster CCTV, he traveled the country and experienced first hand the inequality caused by China's rapid economic expansion. This inspired him to become a documentary filmmaker with a focus on social issues.

Last Train Home was Lixin's debut documentary feature as a director.

In 2006, Lixin worked as associate producer/soundman on the acclaimed feature documentary *Up the Yangtze*, a film about the world's largest hydroelectric project, the Three Gorges Dam. The film played the Sundance Film Festival in 2008, won the Genie award as Canada's top documentary feature, and was nominated for an Indie Spirit Award.

In 2003, he edited the Peabody and Grierson award-winning documentary *To Live Is Better Than To Die*. The film, recognized as one of the most shocking documentary on the topic, revealed China's AIDS epidemic and was featured in Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast on HBO, BBC, CBC and PBS.

MILA AUNG-THWIN - PRODUCER

Named as one of *Playback* magazine's "NEXT 25" list in 2008 as an emerging producer/director. Mila is Co-founder and co-owner of EyeSteelFilm, a documentary film and interactive media company that is dedicated to bringing social and political change through cinematic expression. EyeSteelFilm was named to *Realscreen* magazine's "Global 100" list of top non-fiction companies in the world in 2009.

Mila is the producer of the feature documentaries *Rip! A Remix Manifesto* (2009), *Antoine* (2008), *Up The Yangtze* (2007), *Punk the Vote* (2006) and *Chairman George: from Athens to Beijing* (2005)

LAST TRAIN HOME

A FILM BY LIXIN FAN

featuring
ZHANG CHANGHUA
CHEN SUQIN
ZHANG QIN
ZHANG YANG
TANG TINGSUI

Directed by
LIXIN FAN

Edited by
LIXIN FAN
MARY STEPHEN

Director of Photography
LIXIN FAN

Camera Operators
SHAOGUANG SUN
LIXIN FAN

Music by
OLIVIER ALARY

Produced by
MILA AUNG-THWIN
DANIEL CROSS

Executive Producers
DANIEL CROSS
MILA AUNG-THWIN
QI ZHAO

Co-Producer
BOB MOORE

2009 • Canada/China • 87 mins • Color • Dolby SRD
In Mandarin and Sichuan dialect with English subtitles

Press materials are available at www.zeitgeistfilms.com/lasttrainhome

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F I L M S

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