



Last Train Home Discussion Guide

Director: Lixin Fan

Year: 2009

Time: 85 min

You might know this director from:

LAST TRAIN HOME is Lixin Fan’s first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

The extraordinary LAST TRAIN HOME begins with a simple fact that, in China, more than 130 million migrant workers journey home to their rural villages every year for New Year’s. This is considered the world’s largest human migration. Chaos and claustrophobia are captured in shots of teeming crowds where people wait for days to get on a train that may not come. The film’s power is conveyed through its intimate portrayal of a single family, the Zhangs. Through their story, the abstract becomes human and immediate, personal and universal.

The Zhang parents left their infant children behind with their grandparents in their rural home village to seek work in urban factories. For nearly two decades, they have worked grueling hours to support their family, going home just once a year to celebrate the most important holiday. The emotional devastation of this fractured family lifestyle is embodied in the Zhang’s teenage daughter, Qin, who resents her parents’ absence and desires to leave school and find freedom in the city instead.

Shot over several years in cinéma vérité style, LAST TRAIN HOME vividly presents the social transformation created by China’s rapid economic expansion, the widening rift between its rural past and its urban present, and the traumatic human cost exacted from the millions of Chinese workers whose toil and sacrifice drive the nation’s growing economy, but who are often invisible. This film is a sensitive portrait of a single family, but is dedicated to the 130 million migrant workers whose stories are seldom told, whose individual lives are subsumed by such a large, incomprehensible number.

FILM THEMES

The emotional trauma of millions of migrant workers is examined by telling the story of a single family. *LAST TRAIN HOME* looks at China's rapid economic expansion that tears apart families, upends traditional values, and destabilizes communities.

HUKOU SYSTEM

In China, households are registered in a national system, identifying people as residents of specific areas. This cannot be changed. Rural workers who migrate to cities are not acknowledged as residents of that city, and thus, cannot receive social support and benefits. This Hukou system is considered a caste system that cultivates an under-served working class. During the Great Famine, the majority of those who starved to death were rural residents. Urban residents received rations and were kept ignorant of the suffering in the countryside. Even now, urban residents have access to more services and benefits. Social critics have long argued that the Hukou system must be reformed.

FRACTURED FAMILIES

A consequence of the Hukou system is that the children of migrant workers cannot live with their parents in the cities because they cannot enroll in city schools. They must live with their grandparents or other relatives and attend schools in their rural hometowns. This creates over a hundred million fractured families of children growing up without their parents. The Zhangs represent the emotional trauma suffered by both the children and the parents. While the Zhang parents work demanding hours to provide a better life for their children, their absence creates pain, bitterness, and disconnection.

INTER-GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The Zhang's do not want their children to end up like them. Thus they work hard to send home money and pressure their children to excel at school. However, this seems to be the extent of the mother's communication with her children. Qin, however, doesn't see the point of education and wishes for freedom and an independent life in the city. She drops out of school and works in a factory, but instead of sending her pay home, she spends it on herself, seeking a taste of the new life offered in the cities. Her lifestyle and indulgences contrast sharply with the work and sacrifice of her parents.

GLOBAL ECONOMY

Today's globalized economy comes with a human cost. U.S. factories take advantage of cheaper labor abroad, as well as looser regulations. The migrant workers who manufacture goods quickly and cheaply drive China's rapid economic growth, especially in its exports. The great profit does not go to the migrant workers, while low prices in western nations like the U.S. obscure the high human cost that is exacted.

“We’re all educated to be patriotic since the time we’re young... I think it’s very important for every one of us to realize that loving your country is not just about loving the government. They’re separate entities.

... We need to face our own wrongdoings and try to improve them in order to make things better for everybody.

Lixin Fan

FILM FACTS:

- Filmmaker Lixin Fan, born in China, began working as a journalist with the national television broadcaster CCTV. For that job, he traveled the country and witnessed the vast inequality created by China's rapid economic growth. This inspired him to make documentary films that focused on social issues.
- In 2006, Lixin Fan was an associate producer and soundman for *Up the Yangtze*, a documentary about the world's largest hydroelectric project, the Three Gorges Dam. The film went on to win the Genie award as Canada's top documentary feature and was also an official selection at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival.
- In 2003, Lixin Fan edited the documentary *To Live Is Better Than to Die*, which is about China's AIDS epidemic.
- *LAST TRAIN HOME* won Best Documentary Feature at the 2009 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. The film was also an official selection at Sundance Film Festival.
- The estimated total population of China is 1.35 billion people. In recent estimates, China has more than 260 million migrant workers.
- According to the United Nations, the movement of Chinese migrant workers from rural to urban areas is considered one of the largest migrations in human history. China's rural population decreased from 81% in 1980 to 60% in 2005.
- In 2003, Central Henan province was China's top labor exporter. Around one-third of the rural labor force, about 13 million farmers, worked away from home. They sent back almost \$6.8 billion to their hometowns.
- The average daily wage for urban migrants is about \$4.00. An estimated 160 million people, mostly living in the remote interior countryside, live on less than a dollar a day. This is according to the World Bank in 2005.
- When PBS asked Lixin Fan for an update on the whereabouts of the Zhang family, he told them that Qin had moved to another province to find work. He said, "Unlike their parents' generation, they are more educated and want more. They are no longer satisfied with low-wage and repetitive-labor work, so they migrate to where they can have more opportunity and, perhaps, a more exciting life." Fan also said that the film team helped Qin find a vocational school and that she is now studying in Beijing. According to Fan, Qin still cannot forgive her parents and refuses to call them.
- As for the rest of the family, the mother returned home, and Yang, her son, entered middle school in his hometown. The father continued working in the same factory in Guangzhou, but longer hours, to support the entire family.
- After viewing the film, a woman in Beijing committed to pay for the education of Yang.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film with others so that they may also be moved and enlightened by the Zhang family and the plight of migrant workers in China.
2. Check out the other films that Lixin Fan has worked on: *UP THE YANGZE* and *TO LIVE IS BETTER THAN TO DIE*.
3. Support [The World Justice Project's China Migrant Justice Project](#).
4. Learn more about the factories and workers that produce some of your favorite consumer items.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.