POV’s “Last Train Home” Goes Inside the Promise and Chaos of China’s Booming Economy; Award-winning Film Premieres on PBS on Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2011

Part of the World’s Largest Migrant Work Force, Members of One Family Discover That Opportunity and Hard Work Also Bring Social and Domestic Turmoil

An EyeSteelFilm Production in Association with ITVS International; A co-presentation with the Center for Asian American Media

“A beautifully shot, haunting and haunted large-scale portrait by Lixin Fan about an astonishing migration involving . . . millions [of] Chinese workers who each year travel by train, boat and foot to return home for New Year’s.” — Manohla Dargis, The New York Times

In the opening shots of Last Train Home, as the camera pans over a paved empty lot, then across a sea of people jostling behind barriers and finally into a surging river of humanity, the film plunges the viewer into an extraordinary phenomenon. China’s booming economy depends on the single largest migrant work force in the world: 240 million people who have left their homes and villages to seek work in urban factories. The scale of this internal migration, and the social turmoil it brings, is never more visible than in the workers’ annual return to their families and villages for Chinese New Year. So many millions on the move is a testament to the determination of Chinese workers to reconnect with family and tradition. It also exposes a nation under stress from rapid economic development and massive social change.

Among those millions are husband and wife Zhang Changhua and Chen Suqin who, 16 years earlier, left their village in Sichuan Province — and left their children in the care of grandparents — to work in the city of Guangzhou, 1,300 miles away. Their contact with their children was reduced largely to telephone calls and the annual New Year’s reunion. While the great spaces of China, alternately empty or crowded with anxious tides of people, are always present, Last Train Home is most intimately the story of the Zhang family, who are fated to reach for the promise of the new China and discover its wrenching cost.

Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Lixin Fan’s Last Train Home, an Official Selection of the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and winner of Best Feature-Length Documentary at the 2009 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, has its national broadcast premiere on Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2011 at 10 p.m. on PBS’ POV (Point of View) series. (Check local listings.) The film will stream on the POV website, www.pbs.org/pov/lasttrainhome, Sept. 28 – Oct. 27. POV, winner of a Special Emmy for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking and the IDA Award for Best Continuing Series, closes its 24th season with special broadcasts on Thursday, Nov. 10, 2011 and in winter/spring 2012.

Last Train Home catches the Zhang family at a critical juncture in their struggle to better their lives — or more accurately, the lives of their children. The parents left their village of Huilong when their first child, a daughter, Qin, was only a year old (a son, Yang, would follow). The children were left in capable and caring hands, but the Zhangs’ decision to go was a heartbreaking one made by millions of Chinese parents who felt they had, as Suqin puts it, “no choice.” Like the Zhangs, many have traded a poor but
perhaps psychologically secure life of subsistence farming for long, relentless hours of work in city factories and residence in rudimentary dorm-like structures.

In Guangzhou, the Zhangs sleep in bunk beds and cook their meals on the floor. By day, they make jeans for export to America. “Some jeans are huge!” one worker remarks. “You can fit two people in them.” Factory wages, modest as they are, allow parents to send money home so their children can stay in school. The Zhangs believe that gaining the education they themselves don’t have is the only way for Qin and Yang to have prosperous futures. It is, in fact, the guiding principle of their lives.

This makes what happens to the Zhang family all the more tragic. The factories where the Zhangs work, the dorms where they live, might exist in any developing nation. But the mass journey home for the New Year is distinctly Chinese in the sheer numbers of people involved; their stubborn attachment to tradition clashing with their ambition for new lives; and their endurance. New Year also reveals a developing nation whose emerging infrastructure is already overwhelmed. Among the film’s most harrowing and truly nail-biting scenes are those of the Zhangs and countless others struggling amid barely contained chaos to board the trains that they can only hope will get them home in time.

After a long, snaking train journey through China’s harsh and beautiful mountains, then a bus ride on local roads and finally a trek on foot, the Zhangs arrive in Huilong to find the family, for which they have been working so hard, is unraveling. Mourning the loss of her grandfather and disenchanted with school, 15-year-old Qin is sullen and bitter toward her parents for abandoning her and her younger brother, Yang. The parents’ repeated exinations of how they were forced to leave for the good of their children seem to carry little weight. Their exhortations for Qin stay in school and make the most of it seem only to irritate the teenager. The first of the two New Year holidays that frame Last Train Home brings the Zhangs’ dreams crashing down. In an ironic twist, Qin decides to leave school and, like her parents, go to Guangzhou to find factory work.

In Guangzhou, the parents hope a taste of factory life will cure her of her mistake. But Qin, though shocked by the labor and more than a little lonely, is exhilarated by a new sense of freedom and the ability to make her own money. The three decide to travel together back to Huilong for the New Year, the parents hoping the girl will have decided that school is better than a factory. This second New Year journey in Last Train Home turns into an agonizing five-day trial of physical and mental endurance, which, among other terrors, reveals just how great the gap is between mother and daughter.

In Huilong, tensions shockingly and disastrously boil over. Qin has no intention of returning home and going back to school, and she hasn’t forgiven her parents for leaving her. She curses them and has a violent confrontation with her father. In the denouement of this terrible holiday, Qin takes off for the city of Shenzhen, just north of Hong Kong, where she finds work in local clubs and begins enjoying another part of the new China — a bustling city filled with shopping malls and young, stylish inhabitants.

In Guangzhou, meanwhile, the Zhangs tearfully resign themselves to losing Qin. They then make another fateful decision — Suqin will return to the village to give Yang the attention that might keep him in school. This will leave Changhua alone in the city as the sole support of the family. The decision to attend to one crack in the family’s unity only opens another. It’s another instance in which the Zhangs, like millions of other Chinese, have “no choice.”

“I used to work at television stations in China and traveled to different parts of the country for my job,” says director Lixin Fan. “The sharp contrast between the lives in cities and the countryside always struck me. Submerged under the glamour of the modern metropolis, the poverty in the vast rural area is overwhelming. I started to focus on the migrant workers, who 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. The Zhang family’s story speaks for millions. By observing the fate of one family, the smallest and seemingly stable cell in a quickly evolving society, I hope to articulate the complexities of a nation’s ambition to rise and its impact on culture, society and the individual.”

**Last Train Home** is a production of EyeSteelFilm in association with Telefilm Canada and the Rogers Group of Funds via the Theatrical Documentary Program.

**About the Filmmaker:**

**Lixin Fan (Director/Director of Photography)**

Lixin Fan, based in Montreal, was born in China, where he grew 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** is Lixin’s debut feature documentary as a director. In 2006, he worked as associate producer/soundman on the acclaimed feature documentary **Up the Yangtze** (POV 2008), about the world’s largest hydroelectric project, the Three Gorges Dam. The film was an Official Selection of the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, won the Genie award as Canada’s top documentary feature and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. In 2003, he edited the Peabody and Grierson award-winning documentary **To Live Is Better Than to Die**, a breakthrough film on China’s AIDS epidemic.

**Credits:**

Director: Lixin Fan  
Editors: Mary Stephens, Lixin Fan  
Director of Photography: Lixin Fan  
Camera: Shaoguang Sun  
Producers: Mila Aung-Thwin, Daniel Cross  
Executive Producer: Zhao Qi  
Co-Producer: Bob Moore  
Original Music: Olivier Alary  
Total running time: 86:46

**POV Series Credits:**

Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry  
Co-Executive Producer: Cynthia López  
Vice President, Production and Programming: Chris White  
Series Producer: Yance Ford

**Awards and Festivals:**

- Best Feature-Length Documentary Award, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, 2009
- Cinémathèque Québécoise Award for Best Film from Quebec/Canada, RIDM, 2009
- Best Documentary Award, Whistler Film Festival, 2009
- Best Documentary Award, RiverRun International Film Festival, 2010
- Grand Jury Prize for Outstanding Documentary and Special Jury Prize for Documentary Cinematography, Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, 2010
- Golden Gate Award: Investigative Documentary Prize, San Francisco International Film Festival, 2010
opportunities and community participation. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

ITVS International is a division of the Independent Television Service that runs the Global Perspectives Project (GPP), an international exchange of documentary films made by independent producers, bringing international voices to U.S. audiences and American stories to audiences abroad. ITVS receives core funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people. The GPP is made possible through the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Ford Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible. We do this by funding, producing, distributing and exhibiting works in film, television and digital media. For more information, visit www.caamedia.org.

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 24th season on PBS, the award-winning POV is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 300 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, POV’s Borders. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today’s most pressing social issues. Visit www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)
POV’s award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, plus listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education
POV films can be seen at more than 450 events across the country every year. Together with schools, organizations and local PBS stations, POV facilitates free community screenings and produces free resources to accompany our films, including discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

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