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Trauma, Migrant Families, and Neoliberal Fantasies in *Last Train Home**

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Abstract

This paper examines the traumatic experience of migrant workers through a reading of Lixin Fan's award-winning documentary film *Last Train Home* (2009). I am not primarily concerned, like most trauma-studies-based research, with grand, clearly recognizable catastrophes. I also avoid generalizing about human suffering in the age of global capitalism. I focus rather on post-Socialist China's more hidden social violence and its traumatizing effect on the quotidian life of migrant workers—a subaltern group on the periphery of society. I argue that the trauma of the marginalized population must be socially and politically contextualized. The first section of the essay investigates the traumatic sense of homelessness suffered by the film's migrant family. I show how the family members' loss of home is due to both the alienating capitalist mode of production and the cunning *hukou* system that turns migrant workers into a perpetually floating population. The second part concentrates on the painful intergenerational chasm. Here I argue that the father-daughter strife is a symptom, not just of the clash between modernity and tradition but of the falsehood maintained by neoliberal discourse. Neoliberal narratives of education and consumption construct fantasies such as that of mobility and freedom, subsuming migrant laborers within the nation's capitalist economy and trapping them in a prison of unrealizable hopes. The film ultimately exposes and critiques the state-capital alliance that controls and deprives migrant workers through its economic, political and epistemic strategies.

Keywords

trauma, violence, migrant workers, family, homelessness, neoliberal fantasies, human value

*I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

Trauma studies have tended to focus on the traumatic experience of catastrophic events such as war, genocide, and man-made or natural disasters, which involve mass violence, brutal killings, and death on a large scale. It was his encounter with the veterans of World War I and their unceasing dreams of battlefield horror that engendered Freud's concern with traumatic neurosis and hence trauma theory. For Freud, trauma is caused by violent events that breach the protective shield of our mind unexpectedly. In keeping with this understanding of trauma, Chinese studies scholars have conducted seminal research on the effects of traumatic events in modern China. Conscious of the profound impact of the Cultural Revolution, Xiaobin Yang examines the ways in which traumatized avant-garde writers dissolve rhetorical rationality and thereby deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of modernity. David Wang contemplates the ravages of historical violence throughout the 20th century, from the Boxer Rebellion to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, highlighting the role of literature in documenting and re-enacting the affective aspects of private lives that are silenced by official historiography. In a similar manner, Michael Berry explores the important role played by representations of historical traumas in shaping popular conceptions and imaginations of history and national identity. By taking a fresh view of memory and historical narrative, contemporary critics have gained valuable insights into the intellectual and cultural effects of traumatic events.

However, the tendency to focus on grand, clearly recognizable calamities has left the psychological trauma inflicted by less obvious forms of social violence seldom addressed. What constitutes trauma in an era when large-scale war and militant revolution seem to have faded from the horizon? What kind of wounds do people bear in times of relative peace? In his study of trauma in modern China, Ban Wang points out that, besides the memory of past atrocities, trauma also takes the form of "the ongoing shock of the damaged older lifeworlds under the impact of transnational capital and the massive commodification of social relations" (8). The speed with which China has reshaped itself to fit the mold of global capitalism has brought about radical social changes, which many have found no less traumatic than past catastrophes. Indeed, with the country's expansion of global capital and acceleration of economic development, the organic threads of the social fabric have been brutally unraveled. As Ban Wang observes, the communities previously undergirded by tradition, kinship relations, collective associations, and shared attachments and feelings risk losing their roots (182). Our quotidian life is increasingly dominated by the whimsical market, material culture and mass consumption. Modern-day trauma is thus embodied in people's sense that life as they knew it not so long ago has been radically transformed.

While I concur with Ban Wang's critique of the traumatic violence of global capitalism in contemporary China, I want to go further to emphasize that the trauma experienced by those living on the periphery of the society must be situated in specific social and cultural contexts. Here, I want to zero in on a marginalized social group—migrant workers—and explore the origins of the traumatic experiences they undergo in their everyday life, which, as I will illustrate, is controlled by a distinct array of economic, social and ideological forces in neoliberal China.

Specifically, I will offer a reading of Lixin Fan's award-winning documentary film *Last Train Home* (2009), which sensitively captures the keenly felt yet seldom articulated trauma of a migrant family. First, I will focus on this family's homelessness, something that devastates each of its members. Going beyond the Heideggerian philosophical and existential notion of homelessness, I will look at roles played by global capital and the socialist state in the irreparable disintegration of this family and their loss of home. The family members' repetitive train rides home serve as a desperate yet futile attempt on their part to heal this wound. Second, I will explore the widening intergenerational chasm between the parents and children. The resultant father-daughter squabble is not just the fruit of long-term separation and estrangement, but a dramatic symptom of the inherent contradictions in the post-Socialist rhetoric of human value articulated through education and consumption. The family's common experience of homelessness and its widening intergenerational gap are ultimately both the effects of a new mode of traumatic violence, which is global, state-sanctioned, and imposed through economic structures, government policies and epistemic manipulations.

Becoming Migrant Workers, Becoming Homeless

One crucial aspect of the large-scale rural-urban migration in post-Socialist China is the separation of millions of parents from their children, a consequence of adults leaving their villages to work in cities. The All-China Women's Federation 2013 statistics show that the number of rural left-behind children has reached over 61 million, which is 37.7 percent of all rural children and 21.8 percent of China's children.¹ Most recent films on migrant workers, however, tend to overlook this situation, instead concerning themselves with the trials and tribulations of migrant

¹ See All-China Women's Federation Research Group, "Woguo nongcun liushou ertong chengxiang liudong ertong zhuangkuang yanjiu baogao" 我國農村留守兒童、城鄉流動兒童狀況研究報告 ("Report on the Status of the Rural Left-behind Children and the Floating Child Population in China").

workers in urban centers. Unlike these other films, *Last Train Home* traverses both the rural and urban space, chronicling the everyday life, in all its ups and downs, of a migrant family, the Zhangs. Following this family for three years, the film serves as an intimate ethnography that details their daily struggles to eke out a living without losing their familial bond.

The director, Lixin Fan, a rising documentary filmmaker, has demonstrated an urge to narrate experiences of marginalized social groups that are usually ignored in the official discourse. Previously a journalist and producer at China's CCTV and now based in Canada, Fan operates within a transnational framework that allows him to use international funds to shoot Chinese subjects.² He was the editor of the documentary film *To Live Is Better than to Die* (2003), a pioneering work on China's AIDS epidemic. He also worked as associate producer and sound recorder for the acclaimed documentary *Up the Yangtze* (2007), which focuses on the human consequences of the controversial Three Gorges Dam project. His directorial debut, *Last Train Home*, also shows his concern with the underrepresented—migrant workers in this case.

Mainly sponsored by Canadian film companies and funds supporting the arts such as EyeSteelFilm, Telefilm Canada, the Rogers Group of Funds, and SODEC (Société de Développement des Entreprises Culturelles), this film has won multiple accolades including the prestigious best documentary award at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA). Internationally acclaimed, *Last Train Home* was also well-received by cultural elites and ordinary people alike in China. Moving away from state-sponsored mainstream documentaries, which tend to adopt a top-down perspective on migrant subjects, Fan's film, as Wanning Sun observes, "[is] informed by a more intimate, though not necessarily egalitarian, perspective" in documenting the migrant experience (17).³ Fan's filmography, though still brief, constitutes what Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel call "an alternative

² Xinyu Lu points out that contemporary Chinese independent documentary filmmaking has had a strong link with the state-owned television system. Many independent documentary directors used to work within the official system before producing their own films. The state-run media system endowed them with a great degree of legitimacy, which "facilitated their connections with the most overlooked groups in society, and established the foundation for reaching a broader audience" (30).

³ This essay gains insight from Wanning Sun's illuminating discussion of the politics of recognition played out in the representation of rural migrants in Chinese documentaries. However, while Sun focuses on documentary aesthetics and politics, examining the ways in which "the camera mediates the unequal relationship between the documentary film-maker and the rural migrant subject" (5), I engage in a cultural analysis, exploring how the documentary *Last Train Home* opens up a series of questions about the impact of China's social and economic transformation on rural migrants and their families.

archive” that aims to “record events and give voice to people normally overlooked in the mainstream official and commercial media” (151).

In his portrait of the Zhang family in *Last Train Home*, Lixin Fan pays special attention to the trauma of a family unit as it is hopelessly broken up, its members transplanted in two different locales. As Fan emphasizes in his director’s statement, “Aside from many hardships in life, they [migrant workers] also have to bear constant separation from their families who are left behind” (“A Statement” n. pag.). By underscoring the grief suffered by this floating population due to extended periods of separation from their beloved ones, Fan draws us into a highly emotional world, one where the experiences of suffering become traumatic. The film indeed takes family members’ moment of being torn from their family as the Zhangs’ primal trauma. Driven by poverty, Zhang Changhua and Chen Suqin choose to leave their village home in Sichuan Province and join the flood of migrating laborers to work in the coastal city of Guangzhou in the early 1990s. Their daughter Qin, then just one year old, is left in the care of her grandparents. In the following sixteen years Qin, later joined by her younger brother Yang, only gets to see her parents during the annual Chinese New Year festivities. Her mother, Suqin, miserably recalls, “My tears could not stop when I had to leave.” The heartbreaking experience of her initial departure years ago remains fresh in memory, causing her to tear up whenever she remembers it. The daughter says her parents’ absence made her childhood home “a sad place after all.” If the parents’ departure leaves a light scar, the perennial delay of the family’s eventual reunion inflicts a deeper wound, exacerbating and perpetuating the pain.

Not only does this separation induce psychological pain, but it also poses a threat to the integrity of the home and results in a state of homelessness for three generations of Zhangs—the parents, the children, and the grandma. Being homeless does not necessarily mean that they lack a physical place to sleep. The parents are accommodated in the residential dormitory of the garment factory where they work, and the children and grandma stay at their rural home. However, none of them feel at home in the place where they dwell.

Of course, being “homeless” is not purely a modern philosophical problem of modernity. In his essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” Martin Heidegger broaches this issue. For Heidegger, the impossibility of truly “dwelling” in the present age—that is, the problem of homelessness—is based on the instrumental nature of modern technology, which leads those who wield it to view the world as simply an extractable “standing-reserve” (17). This technology thus fundamentally estranges human beings from their own world (or *vice versa*). Yet such a philosophical

conception of homelessness would seem unable to fully account for the specific predicament of closely-knit social groups, especially families that become uprooted and estranged. Then, how can we really understand the feeling of homelessness that pervades this migrant family? Where does this force that destroys and disintegrates their home come from? I want to suggest that this family's condition of being homeless needs to be understood in a way that combines affective, economic and socio-political factors in the context of contemporary China's capitalist development.

The film *Last Train Home* depicts the lack of an affective home, and shows how this essential lack gives rise to a sense of homelessness. Rey Chow contends that the significance of home is "much more than that of a personal residence and refuge. As an ideal form of *togetherness*, the home also carries the transcendental meaning of an *interiority*, demarcating the boundary between myself or ourselves (as one unit) and the hostile world outside" (54; emphasis added). However, for the Zhang family, not only is the traditional Chinese notion of home, as a place where family members live together as a whole, dissolved by the parents' migration to the city, but the preservation of an interiority, an inner space in which emotional wellbeing can be nurtured and protected now also becomes unrealizable. During their extended stint in Guangzhou, the parents inhabit a tiny, dingy dormitory room in a clothing sweatshop. Inside the room are only a crude bunk bed (with the upper bed being used for storage) and a small square table just large enough for a thermos bottle and their lunchboxes. Here the space of the "home" is reduced to its absolute minimum. No kitchen, bathroom or toilet is provided. The couple's domestic routines of cooking, having meals, and doing the laundry are all performed outside their room in the communal space. Separated from the public area, that is, from the "outside" by only a thin, worn-out curtain, the couple's "home" is too porous and vulnerable to be considered as a real "interior." A room so austere, so penetrable can hardly provide the personal space one needs in order to keep house and to express one's affections to those one is living with, let alone have a regular sex life.

Moreover, the proximity of their dormitory to their workplace makes it hard for this couple to uphold the distinction between their work and private life. Indeed, the couple's life is so indivisibly bound to their jobs that they are practically living within the walls of the factory, toiling night and day. It might seem more appropriate to see this "home" as a mere attachment to or extension of their workplace, a residence designed essentially for the (re)production of daily manual labor rather than for strengthening emotional bonds. The couple's on-site dwelling serves the logic of capitalist production because it allows the owners of capital to maximize the extraction of surplus value from their laborers. Ngai Pun and Chris Smith have called

this kind of work-residence space “the dormitory labour regime”: it “represents an absolute lengthening of the working day, a return to absolute not relative surplus value production and an easy access to labour power during the working day” (42). This setting obscures the separation between the working and non-working life of migrant laborers. This lack of distinction is captured in a scene where a rare moment of intimacy for the couple is disrupted by the ever-present reality of their working life. In this scene Changhua gets sick and is too debilitated to get out of bed. Greatly concerned about her husband’s health, Suqin tends to him lovingly, but then she starts to worry about their unfinished work, which seems impossible for her to complete alone. Here, the affection and intimacy associated with home are quietly yet violently extinguished by the very force of the capitalist space, which regulates and controls the wage laborers’ everyday lives.

The couple’s dormitory room has existed as a heterotopia, to use Foucault’s concept, a place distinguished from yet also connected with home. In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault describes heterotopias in the following manner:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (24)

Heterotopias are places in a given society that are uniquely distinct from all of its other sites. When compared with their traditional home, the parents’ dorm manifests itself as a “counter-site” characterized by its unhomeliness. Indeed, the place where they live is a reinvented and reworked space, one that has been craftily intruded into and encroached upon by the capitalist code of labor-driven reproduction. Despite their otherness, heterotopias nevertheless “have a function in relation to all the space that remains” (Foucault 27). In other words, heterotopias always communicate with, mirror, challenge or invert the meaning of those standard places. In this case it is also clear that rural migrants’ dwellings in the city—a heterotopian other for them—function to make more desirable their homes in the outlying villages. The home they cherish and long for lies in the far distance. Yet, rather than a real physical place, this “authentic” home deep in their minds and hearts is a projected image, a wishful fantasy or indeed a utopia. That is, rather than conjuring up their real home back in their village, their current heterotopian residence incites dreams of a truly utopian

home, distant, idealized and inviting.

At first glance, the documentary's portrayal of the Zhang family's rural home evokes just such an idealized and bucolic way of life. Lixin Fan's camera helps to create a utopian agrarian space by employing "tritely juxtaposed establishing shots of smoggy cityscapes and verdant rural scenery" (Chan 71). The contrast is blatant: whereas the urban realm is gloomy and noisy, its rural counterpart features lush green fields, a tranquil atmosphere and a soothing tempo. The daughter, son, and grandma seem to be living a typical family life—sharing the farm work, dining together, and looking after one another.⁴ This utopian façade, however, crumbles as the camera moves nearer to this left-behind family. With the absence of a middle generation, the family itself seems incomplete and dysfunctional.

The image of the daughter Qin makes clear the physical and emotional burden that a fractured family imposes on a child. Qin first appears in the film carrying an oversized bamboo basket on her back, making her way down a narrow flagstone road. Clearly, this shot portrays her as being weighted down by a considerable burden. The following shots of Qin show her undertaking various household chores and agricultural labor, including collecting and cutting wild vegetables, feeding the livestock, picking corn and carrying a heavy load of it in a basket. A mere middle schooler, Qin has already assumed the duties of a mature woman, doing the tasks her parents should be doing. We also see that, apart from her backbreaking farm work, the young girl is very sad as she feels she has been abandoned. Her desire for parental love has been thwarted, leaving her with a sense of inexorable estrangement and resentment. Qin makes a dramatic confession as she stands before the grave of her grandpa, who while alive was her only source of love: "I just don't want to see my mom and dad," she says, "We never get along." Qin's grandmother is equally burdened. Life seems to have no natural rhythm for her. Though already old, she has to continue playing a maternal role for her grandchildren, while her own children utterly neglect their duty to care for her. The widely separated familial spaces are linked by occasional phone calls and a handful of Spring Festival gatherings. Children, parents and grandparents alike are deprived of the togetherness, intimacy and warmth that rural families once took for granted.

The traumatic experience of the Zhangs and many other rural migrant families is rooted not just in global capitalism but, more importantly, in the state's economic

⁴ Lixin Fan's portrayal of the rural space gives us a somewhat stereotypical image of an untainted rural China. This is different from Jia Zhangke's representations of the natural landscape, which, in Hongbin Zhang's words, "refus[e] to give nature . . . the utopian space of being an outside, an exteriority, or an enclave of history" (136).

reorientation and resultant strategies. The post-Mao reform policies usher in an urban-based, materialist form of development that prioritizes the city over the countryside. In this new discourse of modernity, the cities enjoy privileged access to national resources while the agricultural sector receives less money than before from the state, resulting in the decline and gradual stagnation of the rural economy (H. Yan, *New* 41). As Tamara Jacka notes, “shortage of arable land, lack of local employment opportunities, falling prices for agricultural products, and rising taxes, not to mention unscrupulous and corrupt local leaders, pushed rural people out of their villages” (*Rural* 6). Thus the migration of the Zhangs and many others like them is an outgrowth of the post-Socialist economic restructuring that emaciated the rural areas and families. The Zhang couple sees no choice but to seek employment in the city to support their family. The family is so poor that Changhua cannot even afford the travel expenses on his first trip to Guangzhou. The humiliation he suffers when borrowing a mere 50 yuan (about \$8 USD) from his sister compounds his family’s penury. Though tormented by the pain of leaving her children behind, Suqin eventually chooses to go to the city with her husband so they can earn enough to live: “I did not want to go, but I had no choice. I had to go.” The urban-centered economic policies and the resultant tardiness of rural economic development pushed rural inhabitants to the cities and hence separated millions of families.

The state’s policy of population control also played a pivotal role in making peasant-worker families homeless. The state manipulated the *hukou* or household registration system, allowing rural laborers to fulfill the demands of global capitalism while keeping them from forming a real urban working class (Pun, *Made* 46). In the 1980s, the state relaxed its control over the household registration system, permitting certain country dwellers to transcend the previously rigid rural-urban divide. Peasants were freed from rural land to supply cheap labor in cities and thereby further national development. Though they won freedom of movement, it came with scant legal protection. The state refused to recognize rural migrant workers as permanent city residents. Categorizing them as mere temporary residents, it put them at the mercy of the labor market. They could stay in the city when there was work but otherwise were expected to return to their rural homes. Thus the temporary *hukou* designed for migrant workers denies them formal membership in China’s municipalities, consigning them to a life of transience. Wretchedly conscious of their role as drifters, the Zhang couple has never tried to put down roots in Guangzhou. It is not so much that they always hark back to their ancestral home, but that they are not allowed to treat the city as their home. In other words, the *hukou* system imposes a state of *de facto* homelessness in the city. Migrant laborers are expected to leave the factory

floor as soon as demand slackens or they are seen as getting too old. We see an instance of the latter when Suqin becomes too frail to endure the excessive demands of industrial work.⁵ The state's population control, effected by the residential *hukou* laws, thus deepens migrant workers' suffering by preventing them from establishing a proper home in the city.

The institutionalized exclusion of migrant laborers from the city and their lack of the right to be urban citizens result in the continuing estrangement of migrant family members. Due to peasant workers' invisibility in the municipal *hukou*, the government furtively evades its duty to provide basic "welfare benefits and social services that urbanites received as their natural birthright" (Solinger 5). Not only are they themselves barred from receiving social welfare, but their children are also generally barred from enrolling in urban public schools. Without access to state resources, migrant families can only send their children to costly private daycare centers or schools whose condition and quality are usually very poor. These factors, coupled with their low wages, make it difficult for migrant parents to raise children in the city. As a result, most families have to leave their children at home when they migrate to the city for work.

Changhua and Suqin do just that, leading to hardships for both themselves and their children. The mother feels very guilty about neglecting her maternal duty. A letter from home triggers immense sorrow, robbing her of her appetite. The daughter is gripped by a different kind of sorrow, feeling that she has been forsaken by her parents. Had her parents brought her with them, however, she would most likely be suffering another kind of misery. In this she would be much like those young children who are with their parents but left largely unattended. As we see in the documentary, overwhelmed by a heavy workload, absentee parents leave their little kids to take naps on the messy worktable stacked with scraps of cloth, or let them play in aisles flanked by machines in operation. Thus again we see that the seemingly inevitable trauma of China's migrant families is fundamentally not the fault of the "hard-hearted" or "reckless" parents, but rather is due to the ruthless political/administrative forces of control which collude with global capital, increasing the anguish of these poor families.⁶

⁵ Though Suqin quits her job primarily because she needs to go back to look after her son, the timing of her leaving the city is significant. She returns to her village home after toiling in the factory for more than a decade—perhaps the most energetic period of her life. Now that she is physically worn out she leaves the factory. In front of the camera she sighs: "I am aging. I feel I do not have the same energy as before, and can no longer handle working overtime."

⁶ It should be noted that the government has started to make efforts to ease the decades-long curb on rural-urban migration because social tensions threaten to grow along with the continuous

The yearly train ride home during the Chinese New Year for the family reunion serves as a means for migrant workers to bridge the ineluctable rift within their families. As we see in the film, it takes on an almost ceremonial quality, indispensable and solemn. The stunning aerial shots of the annual exodus of overflowing masses in the opening scene shed light on the scale of this journey and its significance to the floating population. It seems nothing could diminish the workers' sense of the necessity and urgency of this sacred ritual after a year's drudgery in the city.⁷ As usual, the train tickets are extremely hard to get during this Spring Festival period. The film documents the intense anxiety of the Zhang couple when initially they cannot get train tickets, which they need in order to leave the city for the New Year of 2007. They make multiple trips to the train station, endure long waits, and are even willing to spend their hard-earned money to buy more pricey tickets on the black market. When they finally buy their tickets after exhausting all other possible methods, Suqin bursts out laughing in an expression of her great sense of relief—the first and only such outburst that we see in the film. The family reunion is vital for migrant workers, for it gives meaning to the hardships they have endured during the past year in the cold, alien city. As a passenger on the train says, “It does not matter how much you make when you work away from home. You need to spend the New Year with your family. Otherwise life would be pointless.” If the migrant workers’

expansion of the floating population (currently more than 250 million). In 2014, the central government pledged some changes to lift the *hukou* restrictions in small towns, allowing migrant workers to apply for permanent residency. However, stringent controls will remain in larger cities, where most migrants are employed and desire to stay. The reform was met with lukewarm responses from migrant workers, as illustrated in a 2014 survey by the Sichuan Province Bureau of Statistics. The survey showed that 90 percent of migrant workers would prefer to keep their rural *hukou* so as to retain their allocation of agricultural land. For many, the low wages and the precariousness of their jobs will make it hard to secure a stable life in the expensive urban setting, whereas a piece of land guaranteed by the rural residency provides them with a safety net when facing an exploitative capitalist economy. Thus the reform of the *hukou* system must be accompanied by an overall improvement in migrant workers' wages, working terms and social benefits. For the government guidelines for the *hukou* reform, see People's Republic of China, State Council, “Guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu tuijin huji zhidu gaige de yijian” 國務院關於進一步推進戶籍制度改革的意見 (“The State Council Guidelines for the Further Reform of the Household Registration System”). For the Sichuan province survey on migrant workers' attitudes toward the *hukou* reform, see People's Republic of China, Sichuan Provincial Bureau of Statistics, “2014 Sichuansheng jincheng wugong ren yuan xianzhuang diaocha baogao (2)” 2014 年四川省進城務工人員現狀調查報告 (二) (“2014 Survey on the Status of Migrant Workers in Sichuan Province 2”).

⁷ In his analysis of a similar topic, Xiaoping Lin points out that if there is anything that does detain migrant workers in the city during Chinese New Year, it is the capitalist market economy—the “big boss” of the reform era. That is, their job either permits no days off for rural migrants to return home or tempts them to follow the capitalist production schedule at the expense of tradition.

departure from home seems almost to wound the family, the train ride back appears to be instrumental in healing this wound.

The very repetition of this desire to take the train home, however, as well as the repetition of the act itself, bespeaks the futility of the travelers' efforts. When analyzing a little boy's self-invented *fort-da* game, Freud highlights the compulsion to repeat and interprets it as an attempt to retrospectively master those situations where one was passive and overpowered (600-01). Does the migrant laborers' train ride home, as viewed in the film, perhaps serve a similar function? Is it not an effort by means of which they attempt to do the impossible, to regain control and repair severed family ties?

However, actually returning home only seems to (re)awaken them from their dream of reconstructing togetherness, familial integrity and harmony. The children are growing up year by year; the time their parents have missed is irrecoverable. The father shows his awareness of the irreparable damage that has been done when he laments, "Sometimes it seems simply awkward and senseless to travel a long way home, only to find that there is not much to talk about with the kids." Indeed, the sense of familial unity has been already fatally strained, however hard they may try to revive it each year during the New Year holiday. The parents' sense of an urgent responsibility to mend the rift is inextricably linked with their inability to really do so. Paradoxically, the constant repetition of their efforts—like that of the *fort-da* game—only underscores their emptiness and vanity. The train ride home therefore is, as Cathy Caruth explains in a different context, "an encounter with a real established around an inherent impossibility" (103).

Parent-Child Chasm as a Symptom

The long-term emotional alienation of the family stirs antagonism and resentment, culminating in the intense father-daughter confrontation that utterly crushes the dream of healing and redemption. The costly and grueling train ride only brings the Zhang family back to the place of their original wound, open, festering and threatening to infect their annual reunion. The harm caused by the parents' absence is a permanent blow to the parent-child bond, if such a bond has even had a chance to form. On New Year's Eve of 2008, Qin openly defies her father's power by claiming to be "*laozi*"—an appellation used exclusively for the patriarch in Chinese tradition. Qin's blasphemy infuriates the normally reticent and forbearing Changhua, who beats his daughter by way of disciplining her. Suqin sides with her husband, urging Qin to apologize. However, instead of admitting her fault, Qin fights back and

grapples with her father while continuing to assert stubbornly that she is *laozi*.

This fight scene may be said to be the most striking and controversial moment of the entire film. The camera seems to help precipitate the verbal and physical aggression on both sides as Qin screams directly at the camera/filmmaker: “You want to film the real me? This is the real me!” The daughter’s charge betrays the ambiguous politics of representation in independent documentary filmmaking, challenging Lixin Fan’s painfully maintained observational style. Indeed, this scene puts into question a documentary ethics which is constantly caught between the need for pure, detached documentation and the urge to elicit responses from subjects (Sun 13).⁸ Problematic as it is, the camera nevertheless serves to release pent-up emotions. More importantly, it prompts one to further ponder these questions: What is really at stake in this father-daughter battle for authority? Is this intergenerational strife merely a manifestation of the broken family? What does it say about the socio-cultural and political-economic context which causes the family to reach this state?

At first glance, it might be tempting to read the daughter’s self-designation as “*laozi*” as reflecting the bankruptcy of the traditional patriarchal order. Yunxiang Yan has already observed that rural China is witnessing the waning of patriarchy and the rise of “girl power.”⁹ The drama of Qin’s provocation and Changhua’s fury seems to fit well in this context, embodying the conflict between individualism and patriarchy, modernity and tradition. However, what really upsets the parents is not Qin’s transgression of the power hierarchy *per se* but rather her choice of a different path toward self-fulfillment. While the parents stress education, regarding it as the only way out for their children, Qin is mesmerized by the neoliberal ideals of mobility and freedom, which purportedly can be attained through participation in capitalist production and consumption. Clearly the two generations uphold different sets of ideals, but it is not clear whether this opposition can be simply reduced to traditional versus modern. As I will show, their ostensibly divergent viewpoints are in reality two sides of the same coin, both pointing to neoliberal China’s epistemological discourse on human value. The parent-child binary is symptomatic of the inherent contradictions in this discourse.

Changhua and Suqin invest all their hope in their children, expecting them to

⁸ With regard to documentary ethics, Yingjin Zhang also cautions us against a blind belief in the objectivity and truth claims of documentaries of any kind. In a similar vein, Yomi Braester draws our attention to the orchestration and theatricality lying behind what appears to be spontaneous interaction in documentary films.

⁹ Yunxiang Yan points out that, thanks to their marginality in the domestic sphere, young rural women are particularly receptive to new family ideals and social changes and in turn use them to challenge patriarchal authority.

be able to alter their fate through a better education than they themselves had. Though they endure a life of drudgery and frugality in the city, the parents spare neither effort nor expense for the sake of their children's schooling. Each time they talk to Qin and Yang, on the phone or in person, they invariably urge them to do well in school. After a year's separation, the first thing that Suqin requests upon seeing Yang is to take a look at his report card. The slightest drop in his ranking worries the mother. The couple has just one wish for their children. As the father puts it during their New Year's dinner: "Study hard so that you will succeed when you grow up. There is nothing else I can do but make more money to support you." Schoolwork occupies such a central position in the family's already rare conversations that the mention of it begins to offend the children. The parents' sermon-like admonitions ignore the latter's need for care and intimacy, accomplishing the very opposite of what was intended. But Changhua and Suqin insist on the importance of their concern, for they see no path to success that does not run through college.

The parents' faith in education, or in the bright future that it promises, is largely driven by the post-Socialist coding of human value, an essential component of which is the narrative of *suzhi*.¹⁰ Originally a term referring to an individual's physical, psychological, intellectual and moral qualities, *suzhi* has figured heavily in the contemporary discourse of social distinction. It contributes to "understandings of the responsibilities, obligations, claims, and rights that connect members of society to the state; to determinations of which individuals and social groups are included in this set of rights and responsibilities and which are excluded" (Jacka, "Cultivating" 524). One's education level serves as a crucial measure of *suzhi*: the more educated one is, the higher his or her *suzhi* is supposed to be. On the other hand, those who have a poor educational background are ranked as "low-quality" citizens. Thus, in terms of *suzhi* migrant workers are defined "in the negative" (Yan, "Neoliberal" 494), embodying *suzhi* "in its apparent absence" (Anagnost 190). Their lack of *suzhi* makes these laboring masses second-class citizens who are thought to deserve less desirable working conditions and lower wages. As Ann Anagnost writes:

Migrant labor is devalued as having "low quality" (*suzhi di*). Not only does it lack value, but its sheer massiveness—its excess quantity—represents an overwhelming obstacle to modernization. At the same

¹⁰ Although the appreciation of education dates back to the Confucian tradition, this tendency was radically denounced and eliminated in the Maoist discourse of class struggle, which devalued intellectual knowledge in favor of manual labor. Education re-emerged in the national discourse in the post-Mao era with the rise of the *suzhi* narrative during the process of China's modernization and globalization.

time, the undervaluation of migrant labor is what allows for the extraction of surplus value enabling capital accumulation. This seemingly inexhaustible supply of surplus labor becomes the motive force of capitalist accumulation. (192-93)

This *suzhi* discourse, then, makes it easier to justify the exploitation of migrant workers and social inequality in today's China. Changhua and Suqin fall prey to this logic, deprecating themselves as being of "low quality." Their helplessness in the face of this coding of human value instills in them the earnest hope that their children can enhance their *suzhi* through learning.

However, the daughter's withdrawal from school paints a picture of rural education that is less rosy than her parents had imagined. Instead of seeing school as a cradle of knowledge and a useful ladder for social advancement, Qin sees it as a cage. Evidently, a chasm exists "between the parents' perception of how their children can benefit from education and what these children actually experience at school" (Li, Lin, and Wang 180). China's rural education has been plagued by its lack of financial and human resources in the course of the national shift to a market economy. Motivated by the ambition to modernize the country, the state began to allocate most of its support to higher education and devolve responsibility for basic education to local governments in the post-Mao era. The rise of regional disparities engendered by the nation's economic reforms has translated into the present-day urban-rural inequality in education. Owing to their relative poverty and general inadequacy, rural areas and other less-developed regions are greatly disadvantaged when it comes to providing basic public education (Guo). Despite the government's renewed emphasis on rural educational spending in the early 2000s, the rural-urban gap in education continues to widen as big cities go on enjoying funding priorities and financial privileges.¹¹ Most rural schools cope with poor infrastructure, meager subsidies and a shortage of high-quality teachers. All of these defects seriously limit rural students' potential for academic achievement, and hence for social mobility. As Li Wang notes, "the overall disadvantaged socioeconomic status of the rural areas

¹¹ According to Gang Guo, another factor that contributes to the continued underdevelopment of compulsory education in many rural areas is the fact that the government provides much more financial support to minority regions, leaving the education in non-minority poor counties little improved. Guo writes, "the rural area as a whole since 2001 has started to receive unprecedented state attention and to catch up with the national average, but some provinces seem to have gained much more than others. According to the minister of education, most of the central government's spending projects on rural compulsory education since 2001 have been definitely biased in favor of the minority regions in the west" (229).

poses a serious challenge to capability development of rural students as a whole” (418).

Qin is but one victim among millions of the unequal educational system, and she soon despairs of the prospect of academic success. In fact, many of her peers have already dropped out of school and sought employment in big cities. Qin eventually follows in their footsteps and joins a close girlfriend of hers in a garment factory in Xintang. She thus finds herself in an industrial city adjacent to Guangzhou, becoming a migrant laborer herself just like her parents. This news devastates Changhua and Suqin, who by no means want to see their daughter live a life as miserable as theirs. “How could a girl who is supposed to be in school end up sewing in a factory?” sighs the mother. The couple has made persistent attempts to persuade Qin to return to school but to no avail. Qin’s decision to end her studies utterly dashes her parents’ hopes that she could escape her origins through education—which they regard as the only pathway to upward social mobility. Changhua and Suqin thus suffer a heavy blow, feeling that the whole purpose of all their tiresome manual labor has been nullified. They, like countless others, are victims of a discourse that denigrates members of the rural population while sustaining its false hopes.

The daughter appeals to a different set of ideals—mobility and freedom—which she thinks have been promised by the prevailing neoliberalism in contemporary China. As we have seen, the state adjusted its *hukou* (household registration) policy to deracinate peasants, and began to use the promise of mobility to motivate them, especially the rural youths, to supply cheap labor for its expanding capitalist market economy. Unwilling to trap herself in the countryside, where education can hardly engender mobility, Qin chooses the path of labor migration. This gives her a sense of freedom and, for her, “freedom is happiness.” Her wages, though meager, bring her nearer to the goal of financial independence, the lack of which has thus far subjugated her to her parents. Prolonged separation leads Qin to begin relating to her parents increasingly on economic, rather than consanguine and emotional, terms. In her eyes, the intra-family network of relationships is largely monetary, and she believes that making money is what her parents really care about. This is why, when Suqin expresses her wish that she could quit her job and come back to take care of Yang, Qin dismisses this as hypocritical, empty talk. She appreciates the opportunity to make her own money, even if it means boring, exhausting work. For in this way she can escape any parental constraints. As she says, “Although work is tiresome, it gives you money, for which you no longer need to ask your parents.”

Absorbed in the neoliberal construct of such ideals as mobility and flexibility,

Qin is, however, blind to other forms of constraint. Moving to the city does not necessarily alter her social status. She does not manage to evade the fate of her parents' generation, nor is she able to find work that is any less demanding than the kind she did back home. Qin becomes a replica of her mother in spite of her deep-seated desire to be different. The first image we have of her after her move to the city—a girl burying herself in sewing at a machine—precisely recreates the shot of her parents at the beginning of the documentary. Ironically, the parents and daughter who had been alienated from one another establish an unexpected connection through the type of labor—what Marx would see as a kind of alienating industrial production—they are enslaved by. Later, when Qin heaves a huge bundle of scrap fabric into a corner of her workplace, one is reminded of an earlier scene in which she summons all her strength to move aside a basket of corn in her rural home. The same painful expression appears on Qin's face, suggesting that she has not been able to escape from the fate of doing heavy labor. While the neoliberal promise of mobility has drawn Qin into a fantasy of unrestricted roaming, her more experienced co-worker brings her back to reality. What she mistook for freedom was really the choice of “leaving one factory to end up in another.” As Tonglin Lu rightly points out, “Migrant workers, who have left their remote provinces to work in the metropolitan areas, remain no less localized” (“Fantasy” 172). Indeed, they remain outsiders marginalized by their *hukou* status, “low quality,” and economic destitution. Moving to the city has paradoxically placed Qin as well as many other rural youths “in the position of being exploited and alienated, unable to shed [her] identity as a mere migrant laborer” (Wang, “Violence” 164).

Qin is above all enchanted by the neoliberal concept of freedom through consumption. The consumption of commodities, denounced and suppressed as a bourgeois vice under Mao, is now enthusiastically embraced and promoted in the post-Socialist era. Ngai Pun says that “[t]he productivist logic of Maoist China has now been replaced by a consuming desire, construing a yearning for setting China on the rail of global modernity” (“Subsumption” 487). Deeply aware that consumption is a crucial driver of global capitalism, the neoliberal state is invested in inciting the people to become swept up in a frenzy of consumerism. Consumption is touted as a democratic and egalitarian way to exercise both freedom and control—people can buy whatever they desire in the teeming marketplace. This freedom to consume proves particularly appealing to young migrant workers, whose loss of autonomy in the sphere of production seems to find some measure of compensation here. They are eager to go out and shop in their free time, yet consumption does not free them from the drudgery of production. In the film, as Qin and her girlfriend browse through the

clothes in a department store, they almost instinctively ask themselves whether they may have made the very goods they wish to buy. This offhand question evokes the double image of young migrant workers as being simultaneously sweaty laborers and ardent consumers. Unlike many older rural migrants who tend to save every penny to support their families, the younger generation is enthusiastic about spending what they have earned. This dual identity is precisely the result of the shrewd collaboration of state and market: by quickly spending the wages they earn, the workers only help to raise the profit margins of their employers.

Consumption also beguiles because it purports to raise the social profile of the consumer. Just like education, which is intimately linked to assessment of one's *suzhi*, consumption has played an ever-growing role in judgments of "human value" since the turn of the twenty-first century. The development of China's capitalist economy has bred an emerging middle class, whose lifestyle is touted as being modern, urban, and desirable in the dominant cultural discourse. This middle-class standard of life feeds the Chinese an appetite for consumption, through which citizens hope to gain membership in the middle class. Louisa Schein observes: "a general culture of consumption—an acute commodity desire linked to social status—has saturated all sectors of Chinese society, regardless of what specific changes in actual consumption patterns have taken place" (225-26). Unable to make changes through education, young rural migrants are keen on elevating their status by way of consumption. Buying new products seems to provide them with a viable way to shake off their abject origins and reposition themselves as "valuable" modern citizens. Qin derives a sense of self-assertion precisely from her capacity for consumption and the prospect of becoming an up-to-date urban girl through it. To follow the latest urban vogue, she gets a perm in a trendy salon. When her new look slightly disorients her, the stylist appeases her, saying, "Like a Barbie doll. Foreign girls all look like this." Being associated in this way with Western girls, the true representatives of current cosmopolitan taste, instills in Qin a sense of assurance easily detected in her stride on the sidewalk. Interestingly, the film inserts a resoundingly upbeat popular song at this juncture to amplify Qin's complacency. Yet the blatant artificiality of the music in this mainly reality-based documentary film serves to underscore the falseness of her new pose. Her desire to buy a new identity is in a sense as hallucinatory as the music.

The mirage of freedom and mobility through consumption dissolves as Qin is completely deprived of any agency toward the end of the film. In search of higher wages and greater self-realization she later finds a job in a nightclub, immersing herself in a life of urban decadence. The girl whose fantasy of romance was just

beginning to burgeon has now transformed herself into an object of men's desire, dressed provocatively and constantly being gazed at. In thus becoming a sexual object she has become subjugated to the post-Mao capitalist power structure so profoundly that her autonomy has been all but obliterated. Her nightclub job includes a daily session during which all the employees gather together to recite the company's working tenets:

Customers are always right;
Teamwork is always right;
The boss is always right;
We are the champions of entertainment and teamwork.

Such mechanical repetitions help to break down, in young women like Qin and her co-workers, that sense of individuality and autonomy they had come to the big city in search of. The patriarchal power of her father that Qin scorned has been replaced by a profusion of capitalist edicts regarding her job, demanding customers and (often male) bosses. The neoliberal ideology of consumption thus fabricates an illusion of freedom that attracts and enthralls young migrants while all along working to weaken their sense of subjectivity and agency. The migrant workers, especially the younger ones, find themselves trapped in a closed circuit of mindless, degrading production and falsely-uplifting consumption—the twin drivers of the capitalist economy. Rohit Varman and Ram Manohar Vikas are right to argue that the “unfreedom of subaltern groups is a systemic necessity in the spheres of production and consumption under capitalism” (128). The tragedy of many young migrants like Qin is that they are utterly benighted by the neoliberal economy's web of phantoms and deceits, mistaking bondage for freedom, stasis for mobility.

Conclusion

The everyday traumas of the migrant family in *Last Train Home* make clear the corporate, political and epistemic strategies that dispossess migrant workers. Combining constraint, stimulation, seduction and deception, a host of different actors shape these workers' choices and experiences. The separation, estrangement, and homelessness of the Zhang family bear the imprint of the post-Socialist deprivation and marginalization of labor migrants. This homelessness has its roots in the exploitative capitalist production of space and the *hukou* system, which forces peasant workers to become a perpetually floating, alienated underclass. They are

ensnared in and damaged by the false promises of the neoliberal economy. The heartbroken parent-child conflict in the film points directly at the deceit of the neoliberal rhetoric of human value. The phantom of upward social mobility dissipates when the parents' hope is shattered by the innately unfair, unequal educational system, and Qin becomes a young migrant woman who loses herself in the myth of gaining agency through consumption. Neoliberal China has adopted a new mode of governance that exerts control over its subjects through producing, rather than repressing, desires such as those for mobility and freedom (Rofel). This scheme constitutes a hidden but no less powerful form of violence, enticing migrant workers into the orbit of the capitalist economy while mercilessly dashing their dreams.

Lixin Fan's award-winning documentary film *Last Train Home* lays bare the traumas of migrant workers against the backdrop of China's fervent attempt to keep pace with the global economy. The shots of murky urban skylines, smoking chimneys, piles of cardboard boxes printed with the words "Made in China," and the rich supply of commodities on sale in the stores and shops all accentuate China's new position as a world factory and a global market. Migrant workers are drawn into this collective revelry of globalization along with the rest of society. The interviews with migrant workers in the film make clear their great interest in Western modes of consumption and American sports such as the NBA games.¹² Interestingly, these migrant workers' global frenzy is blended with a nationalist sentiment. They exhibit a patriotic feeling, whether they are cheering for China against the United States in the 2008 Olympics or hoping to see their nation's own newly-created commercial brands. Their embrace of both globalization and patriotism is ironically contrasted with their obvious subaltern status. Global capitalism and the state have successfully constructed fantasies for migrant workers to relish, while no real attempt has been made to help them realize these dreams.

As the entire nation of China deliriously celebrated the 30th anniversary of the country's "Reform and Opening Up," the glorious success of Beijing's 2008 Olympic Games, and the overall shimmering façade of growth and prosperity, Lixin Fan presents in his film the contrasting image—less familiar to the rest of the world—of China's migrant workers and the heart-wrenching reality of their everyday lives. The image of a huge crowd of them helplessly stranded in a railway station in a snowstorm, waiting to get trains back to their hometowns and villages to see their children and

¹² Regarding marginalized social groups' excitement about the global culture, Tonglin Lu incisively notes, "The farther away these people are situated from the prosperity created by the process of globalization, the more attractive every connection to this fantasy space becomes" ("Trapped" 134).

other relatives, offers perhaps the most powerful visual metaphor to show how their country has made them homeless and left them behind.

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