

Migration and Home: *Last Train Home* and *Mountains May Depart*

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Abstract

In this article I attempt to analyze Lixin Fan's debut documentary *Last Train Home* and Jia Zhangke's film *Mountains May Depart* with a focus on their representation of migration and home. The two productions both adopt a realistic mode to show how migration changes family structure and familial relationship when China is rising to become a global economic giant in the new millennium. While *Last Train Home* centers on the plight of the underclass in their domestic migration from rural to urban areas, *Mountains May Depart* expands to transnational migration of the rich. I argue that the two productions show the common traumas—collapse of familial structure and loss of intimate human connection, experienced by people with different class backgrounds in the age of globalization characterized by heightened domestic and transnational migration.

Keywords: migration, home, familial, emotional

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移動與家在《歸途列車》 和《山河故人》中的再現

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摘要

本文試圖分析移動和家在範立欣的首部紀錄片《歸途列車》以及賈樟柯電影《山河故人》中的再現。兩部作品均以現實主義的手法，呈現了中國在 21 世紀崛起成為全球經濟強國的背景下，移動是如何改變家庭結構和家庭關係的。雖然《歸途列車》聚焦底層民眾從農村到城市的國內遷徙中所面臨的困境，《山河故人》則將視角擴展到富人的海外移民。本文的觀點是兩部作品反映了在以頻繁的國內外流動為特徵的全球化時代，不同階層所面臨的共同傷痛：家庭結構的坍塌以及親密人際關係的缺失。

關鍵詞：移動、家、家庭的、情感的

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In this article, I attempt to analyze Lixin Fan's debut documentary *Last Train Home* (2009, hereafter *Train*) and Jia Zhangke's film *Mountains May Depart* (2015, hereafter *Mountains*) with a focus on their representation of migration and home. Though they belong to different genres, I justify a paired study of them due to the following reasons. First, the two productions both adopt a realistic mode to show how migration changes family structure and familial relationship when China is rising to become a global economic giant in the new millennium. Second, while *Train* centers on the plight of the underclass in their domestic migration from rural to urban areas, *Mountains* expands to transnational migration of the rich. Together *Train* and *Mountains* reflect the two most representative migration trends in contemporary China: poor people leave their underdeveloped hometown for larger cities where they make a humble living as migrant workers while rich people migrate to more developed western countries for a better life.

In one of his most significant works *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Giorgio Agamben defines bare life as "the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (8) and points out that bare life exists "at the margins of the political order" (9). In her monograph *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler responds thoroughly to Emmanuel Levinas' elaboration of "face" which he associates with "the extreme precariousness of the other" (134). Butler writes, "To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself" (134). Though Agamben and Butler discuss "bare life" and "precarious life" in different contexts, both terms relate to biopolitics and aim to address social justice and equality. In this article I want to use the terms "bare life" and "precarious life" to refer to the condition of migrant workers and their children in contemporary China.

In addition, Sara Ahmed's elaboration of home and migration also assists my analysis. Ahmed holds that there is no idealistically unadulterated, stable and comfortable space called home since "strangeness and movement" are embedded "within the home itself" (88). In other words, home represents both harmony and discordance; it engages continuity and rupture, the customary and the alien. For Ahmed, home is an issue of affect because it is a "*sentimentalised*" space of belonging: "being-at-home is a matter of *how one*

feels or how one might fail to feel" (89).¹

Drawing on Avtar Brah's proposition that home is the lived experience of locality, Ahmed suggests:

We can think of the lived experience of being-at-home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home. The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. Movement away is always affective: it affects how 'homely' one might feel and fail to feel.(89)

Ahmed's trope of the second skin emphasizes two points. First of all, home and away are not antithetical; rather, they are symbiotic and their border is slippery because they constitute and define each other. Second, similar to the dialectical relationship between home and away, subjects and the space they regard as home are also mutually constituted, deeply entangled and intimately influenced by each other.

Continuing the bodily analogy, Ahmed argues that narratives about migration are "*skin memories*: memories of different sensations that are felt on the skin" (92).² In other words, the body of the migrant can be understood as a receptacle or an archive of various feelings, perceptions and sentiments arising from border-crossing experiences. It is foreseeable that skin memories are not always delightful because they materialize in translocal movements that may engender vigilance, suspicion and even ostracization from the local. Ahmed's account of the migrant condition as an affective bodily experience underpins my subsequent examination of *Train* and *Mountains* that represent various feelings about migration.

¹ Italics in the original.

² Italics in the original.

Last Train Home

Not long after the documentary begins, the camera shows a heart-rending scene: two toddlers are playing on the tiny empty lot among piles of garments on a narrow street where bicycles, motorcars, trucks and minibuses are crisscrossing. Their parents must be among those garment workers, but not a single person around them seems to be concerned about their safety, even though it is clear for audiences that such a disorderly environment not only makes their life precarious, but also puts their future into question.

The camera then zooms in for a slender bare male body which is moving slowly with a carton box inscribed “MADE IN CHINA” on his back. After unloading the box in the designated area, the carrier squats down, panting. In one of the subsequent shots, audiences glimpse his youthful face. The scene then shifts to the inside of a noisy garment factory where there are middle-aged workers such as the Zhang couple who are the protagonists of *Train*, teen laborers, frolicking toddlers and sleeping babies. In the following shot audiences see the bare living room and cramped bedroom of the Zhang couple who have to send money back to support their two left-behind children and aging mother in their faraway hometown. If we attach the label “bare life” to the Zhang couple and millions of other adult migrants like them, how should we describe their next generation for whom they take back-breaking yet least rewarded jobs? Is it possible for their children to live a more dignified life? Do those children have more space for upward mobility?

With the advancement of the plot, Fan’s documentary provides an unpromising answer. Focusing on the experiences of the Zhangs, *Train* reveals the downside of China’s economic miracle in the past twenty years: the disruption of the close-knit family and the tenuity of familial bond. To make a better life, Zhang Changhua and his wife Chen Suqin left their far-flung village in Sichuan Province for Guangzhou, the manufacturing center of Southern China, when their daughter Qin was only one year old. By the time filming started, Qin had grown into a 17-year-old teenager. For sixteen years, Qin and her younger brother Yang have been living with their grandmother. The Spring Festival is the only time for Qin and Yang to reunite with their parents.

Qin and Yang’s experiences are not rare among left-behind children in China. According to the 2013 research report of the All-China Women

Federation, the number of left-behind children has totaled over 61 million, among whom 46.74 percent have parents who are both migrant workers and close to 33 per cent are raised by their grandparents. As the majority of the left-behind children's grandparents are primary school graduates and some are even illiterate, they are confronted with many difficulties in child rearing (Su).

In 2015 China Youth and Children Research Center released its research report on left-behind children. The report calls attention to the following issues of left-behind children: accidental injury or death, lack of interest in study, skipping classes, loneliness, hooliganism, juvenile delinquency, addiction to Internet pornography and suicidal tendency (Wang). Moreover, as what is frequently covered by the media, left-behind girls are easy prey to sexual harassment, abuse and rape. Some are traumatized by the sexual violence they have encountered and need psychotherapy. It is evident that inadequate parental supervision and guidance have caused most of the thorny issues about left-behind children.

Although Qin and Yang are fortunate to escape the worst of the above-mentioned problems, the documentary presents their obvious changes after long-term separation from their parents. For instance, Qin is unwilling to open her heart to her mother when they talk on the phone. Meanwhile, Qin's father has perceived that his children do not talk to him and his wife much when they return home. What is most revealing is that Qin has turned into a rebellious teenager—she decides to quit school and become a migrant worker, despite her parents and grandmother's strong opposition. It is noteworthy that years ago Qin's grandmother returned to their ancestral village to support the nation's call for agricultural development. As the New York Times critic A. O. Scott sharply points out, Qin's grandmother is “part of a long cycle of sacrifice and suffering propelled by changes in state policy and shifts in the global economy.” Though Qin's parents and grandmother expect her to break out of the bitter fate of the family by studying hard, Qin only brushes them off because many of her childhood friends and former classmates have left their village and become migrant workers in the cities.

The documentary poignantly presents the emotional alienation between Qin and her parents in the following scenes. Qin visits her late grandfather's grave before she leaves home. She kneels down and confesses to her grandfather that she does not get along with her parents and even does not want to see them. Qin also divulges to her brother that she will not come back

home often, because it is “a sad place” for her. It is because she fails to feel her home is “the home” she yearns for that Qin decides to escape and find a new one for herself.

What is ironic is that Qin, a high-school dropout, cannot branch out a better life than her parents. She simply repeats their life course—Qin also becomes a garment maker but in a different city. There is one scene in which Qin is tying a huge bundle of cloth together and then moving it with her teeth clenched. This hard labor reminds audiences of the previous toil that Qin is engaged with at her village. In one of the earlier shots Qin is seen carrying on her back a full basket of grass or corns that she has hand cut or picked. Though Qin is walking amid a picturesque landscape, it is distressing to see Qin has to bend her small body forward when the basket is too heavy. After arriving home, Qin needs to do more heavy chores—for example, feeding pigs with her finely minced grass. It is evident that Qin is primarily engaged in physically instead of intellectually challenging labor before and after her departure from her timeless village where the majority of people now are the elderly and children. Though she has taken up a second skin after moving to the city—for example, Qin makes her hair more stylish and wears more fashionable clothes, she cannot change her marginalized social status.

The emotional tension of *Train* reaches its height after the Zhang couple takes Qin and her belongings home, because they expect Qin to go back to school. Qin keeps holding back her anger until her mother tells his brother Yang that she wants to take care of him at home. Qin regards her mother’s words hypocritical, which enrages her father who then starts to chastise her unruliness. However, Qin argues with her father and even swears, which leads to an intense fight between them. What follows is an awkward family reunion dinner: the grandmother is crying, Yang is lowering his head, Qin is wearing a rebellious look and the Zhang couple look helpless.

Despite her grandmother’s tears and mother’s prayers before Buddha, Qin leaves home again. This time she is heading for Shenzhen where her new job is a bar waitress. The documentary sensitively captures Qin’s changes: she is gradually turning herself into a modern urban girl. When she finishes work at the bar, Qin is seen wearing short pants with a shiny belt and a T-shirt which sexily exposes her left shoulder. For the first time her long legs and graceful walking gait appear in the camera.

As mentioned above, these changes of Qin can be regarded as her

second skin after migration to the city. This second skin brings her a sense of new self and freedom that cannot be felt in her dull village life. However, the flip side of this second skin, which bears the hallmark of modern urban life, is the emotional alienation in human relationships. This is shown in the following scene: in the crowded disco club Qin is dancing crazily to the loud music, not knowing or caring her father is sick in bed. The documentary does not reveal more details about Qin thereafter and leaves her future open.

Though *Train* has won many international awards, it does not touch much upon the factors which lead to the bare and precarious life of migrant workers and the tenuity of their familial bond. What is perhaps more disheartening is that although many migrant workers, as the documentary shows, clearly understand they have been highly exploited for the economic boom of China, they do not critique the social policies that lead to their status quo. Rather, they still pay homage to their eternal home—China which makes their tragedy. In one of the scenes on the train, one migrant worker expresses his good wishes that Chinese athletes will win more golden medals than their American counterparts in the Beijing Olympic Games. When the documentary approaches its end, Qin and her bar colleagues are watching attentively the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games. These people have not realized that they cannot benefit much from a rising and stronger China that sacrifices its poorest and least advantaged people to whom they belong.

Before I end my discussion of this section, I want to quote the note of the Chinese director Cui Zi'en in his 2007 documentary *We are the ...* of Communism which is about migrant workers and their children's education in contemporary China. Cui's following reflection, though primarily focusing on migrant workers' children, lays bare the social problems that have been glossed over in *Train*:

Before making this documentary, I thought that people of my age and generation were paying off the bill of China's one-dimensional, super development in economy: we observe the absence of belief, democracy and freedom, and suffer the vast vacuum of morals and trust. An unchecked desire for money seems to define all human relationships and interactions. Yet after spending six months with the children in this documentary, I realize that I actually stand closer to those who are on the benefiting end of current social change. People

of my age and generation are not the sacrificed but mindless graspers of material benefits. The really sacrificed are the powerless children recorded in this documentary, this younger generation of Chinese who are being forgotten, abandoned and deleted by the so-called communism. (Cui)

Mountains May Depart

Jason McGrath holds that JiaZhangke's films have "a penetrating view into Chinese society in the postsocialist or reform era and make implicit claims regarding the nature of Chinese urban reality today" (82). Instead of using urban realism, Jie Li borrows the German word *heimat* and coins the term "heimat realism" to describe Jia's film series about his hometown Fenyang or people from Fenyang. Li argues that *heimat* is closer semantically to the Chinese word *guli* (hometown) than the English word "homeland". Li proposes the term to initiate a comparative study of Jia's films with the classical genre of German *heimat* film (109). We can say that Jia not only expresses nostalgia for hometown in his *heimat* film series, but also tries to document the massive changes in the social landscape of China after it reintegrated into the world economic system since the late 1970s. In other words, Fenyang is a mirror reflecting similar stories of life vicissitudes in other parts of urban China.

In an interview Jia revealed that since his father passed away in 2006, he had started to spend more time thinking about family (Ma). One day he received a pair of keys from his mother who was living alone in his hometown. Like the mother character Shen Tao in *Mountains*, his mother told him to go back home whenever he wanted. Only at that moment did Jia realize his aging mother's emotional needs of him. What she wanted was not money that Jia never stopped offering but physical accompany and emotional care. It is this epiphany that drives Jia to make *Mountains*, his first attempt to examine "deeper emotional issues arising from China's social changes" (Ma).

In the interview Jia reflected upon his pseudo-filial acts in the past and elaborated on his observation of China's social changes in the reform and opening-up era:

In the last 20 years, the changes in Chinese society have instilled a new value system. People believe that financial currency goes further than emotional connection, so all of their energy and time is put into the accumulation of economic wealth, and they forget about what's really important. I think I am a person who's prone to self-reflection and over-analyzing, but even I have fallen under the spell of money. I thought it could buy my mother nicer things and give her a better life, and I could therefore be less worried about her. This startling realization moved me to make a film about emotions. (Ma)

In fact the film's title suggests the thematic concern of the director. Though the Chinese title which literally means Mountains, Rivers and Old Friends is far more emotive and nostalgic than the English one, Jia maintains that they express similar meanings:

(A) ccording to an old Chinese aphorism, time can move mountains and rivers, but our emotions and the way we deal with the inevitable rites of passage—love, family, aging, death—remain unchanged. Perhaps our emotional existence is the most fundamental. (Ma)

It is obvious to note that all main characters in the film are emotionally unfulfilled, which often results in the failure of intimate relationship or the tenuous familial bond. I argue that Jia deals with the trope of shattered home through these emotionally unfulfilled characters. Take Liang Jianjun/Liangzi as an example. Liangzi, a poor but kind coal mine worker in Fenyang, falls in love with the vivacious teacher Shen Tao. Unlike other arrogant middle-class girls, Tao accepts and reciprocates Liangzi's love readily. However, Liangzi has a far wealthier and ruthless romantic rival Zhang Jinsheng who is an upstart entrepreneur. In the triangle relationship Jinsheng views Liangzi as an unhomely figure and a thorn in the flesh which must be dug out. To thwart Liangzi's confidence and win Tao's heart, Jinsheng invites Tao and Liangzi on board his newly bought red Santana which is a rarity and symbol of affluence in the small town in 1999. After buying the coal mine where Liangzi is working, Jinsheng suggests Liangzi give up on Tao because he does not

believe Tao will marry Liangzi. Jinsheng then fires Liangzi when he dismisses the admonition.

Fenyang is no longer the cozy home for Liangzi after he loses his job and beloved woman. To forget the humiliation he has experienced in his hometown, Liangzi decides to leave Fenyang and make a living in the neighboring province. What best displays his heartbrokenness, if not despair, is that he throws his key upon the top of his house before embarking on his journey, swearing he will never return. For Liangzi, the key symbolizes his emotional connection with his birthplace. Determinedly severing the bond, Liangzi expects to leave the unpleasant memories behind and begin a brand-new life. Fifteen years later, however, Liangzi breaks his promise and goes back to Fenyang due to his mining-job induced lung cancer. It is clear that the mild-tempered Liangzi has not been able to twist his fate and his impending death will deprive his wife and little baby of the integrity of family.

With the development of the plot, audiences come to understand other meanings of Liangzi's key. Though he does not have the key, Liangzi breaks the lock with a hammer and easily enters his house. When she comes to visit him, Tao gives Liangzi not only some money, but also his key that he threw away fifteen years ago. In the close-up shot audiences see the key and its attached ornaments look like new ones. By keeping the key carefully, Tao tries to keep fresh her memory of her past lover. The key thus is not only a tool to open the door of Liangzi's house, but also a bridge that connects the star-crossed lovers' hearts.

By the time Tao returns Liangzi's key, audiences have already known that Tao has divorced and lost the custody of his son Dollar who is studying at an international primary school in Shanghai. Considering herself a useless woman, Tao believes Dollar will have a brighter prospect if he lives with his father who has become a venture capital investor. The film presents Tao's acute sense of feeling not at home in the reunion scene with Dollar who returns to Fenyang to attend his grandfather's funeral. Dollar's emotional alienation from his mother is vividly shown in the scene where Dollar is walking pensively behind Tao and keeping a certain distance between them. After he enters Tao's car and fastens the seat belt, Dollar still keeps his mouth shut and continues to look at Tao as if she were a stranger. Tao breaks the silence first and asks Dollar to call her "*Ma*" which is the common colloquial

word meaning “mother” in Chinese. What startles Tao is that Dollar responds in the English word “Mummy” which Tao is unfamiliar with. Tao’s anger is provoked again when she notices Dollar’s scarf around his neck. Not knowing the scarf is part of Dollar’s school uniform, Tao puts it off impatiently because she considers it girlish.

Tao’s above-mentioned reaction is typical when we encounter something foreign and unfamiliar. Unlike Dollar who has put on a second skin after moving to the international metropolis Shanghai, Tao is only familiar with the small city Fenyang where few people may have heard of international schools and even fewer have seen their western-style uniforms. The difference and oddity arouse Tao’s instinctive resistance and she immediately tries to turn unfamiliarity into familiarity. For example, Tao forces Dollar to call her “*Ma*” hearing the “wrong” word “Mummy” and Dollar obeys. Another telling moment is that Tao stops their conversation when Dollar is talking in Shanghai dialect with his stepmother via his iPad. The Shanghai dialect through which Dollar and his stepmother display their emotional bond is only too jarring and alienating for Tao to endure at her home.

When Tao sees Dollar off on slow trains, Dollar shows pictures of Melbourne on his iPad to Tao, saying it is the place that he is going to. However, Tao leaves the iPad aside and gives Dollar a set of keys and tells him to go back home whenever he wants. Similar to Liangzi’s key, Tao’s key is also an intimate artifact endowed with symbolic meanings. Knowing clearly that Dollar may not visit her as much as she expects, Tao gives him the key to remind him of his ancestral origin and blood bond.

However, it is disappointing to notice that Dollar has tried to uproot almost all his Chinese connection in the third part of the film. After living in Australia for 11 years, Dollar only speaks English. This is understandable for the sake of integration to his adopted country. It is nonetheless exaggerating that he and his Fenyang-dialect speaking father communicate with each other via Google translator. It is also disconcerting that Dollar answers, “I don’t have a mother.” when his Chinese language teacher Mia asks his mother’s name.

Though he tries his best to obliterate his Chinese origin, Dollar does not seem to be at home in Melbourne. For instance, Dollar cannot get along with his father who still keeps his Chinese life habits and refuses to learn and speak

English. Feeling bored with his current life, Dollar wants to quit college but does not know what to do. It is especially noteworthy that Dollar has experienced the break-up of his family again: he is living only with his father in the spacious seaside house and his Shanghainese stepmother disappears from the Australian scenes. The film does not directly address the whereabouts of Dollar's stepmother. However, we can infer from Dollar's conversation with Mia that Dollar's father may have divorced again.

Sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo once wrote "immigration is one of the most powerful forces disrupting and realigning everyday life" (3). We can see that family disintegration accompanies Dollar's each migration. Though Dollar has taken on different skins such as Shanghai dialect, English language and international perspectives in his migration trajectories, the unsteady familial structure makes him a forever abandoned child. The ensuing shame and sadness drive him to repress his memories of his biological mother, native Chinese and Shanghai dialect.

Like Dollar, Mia also tries to refrain from talking about her past in public. Moving from Hong Kong to Toronto on the eve of Hong Kong's return to China, Mia comes to Australia after the end of her marriage with a selfish white man. If moving away from Hong Kong is for political concerns, then migrating to Australia is for emotional healings in the wake of family break-down.

Though Dollar refrains from retrieving the memories he wants to repress, the film presents two poignant scenes of *déjà vu*, which testifies "skin memories" of migration. In the first scene, Dollar recalls something familiar when Mia is playing the Cantonese song "Zhenzhong (Take care)" during the class break. However, he cannot remember exactly when and where he first listened to the song. In the second scene, Dollar tells Mia he experiences "reincarnaton" when he is sitting in Mia's running car. However, he also does not know why he has such a feeling. In fact in both scenes Mia evokes Dollar's blurry memories of his mother Tao. When Tao is sending Dollar back to Shanghai, she plays the song "Zhenzhong" on the train and listens together with Dollar. Knowing Dollar does not understand the lyrics, Tao does not explain but to immerse Dollar and herself in the melancholic melody as a way to bid farewell. It is also Tao who drives Dollar to attend his grandfather's funeral and to show him around Fenyang afterwards. It is clear that long-term separation has obscured Dollar's memories of his mother. Mia, a surrogate

mother character, rekindles his desire to look for stronger emotional bond. Though many viewers raise eyebrows at Dollar's affair with Mia because of their huge age difference, their romance reflects the inadequacy of love and care in their respective families.

Conclusion

In this article I have analyzed how *Train* and *Mountains* present the familial and emotional cost wrought by China's rapid social transformation and economic development in the era of insane global capitalism which leads to the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. The two productions show the common traumas—collapse of familial structure and loss of intimate human connection, experienced by people with different class backgrounds in the age of globalization characterized by heightened domestic and transnational migration. In conclusion, migration may not bring people more happiness and prosperity. Rather, shattered home and emotional alienation are often the result of migration, as *Train* and *Mountains* show.

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