

The Reel Shanghai

French Filmmaker Captures Chinese Family's Life, Struggles

乐诗薇：“第三只眼看中国”

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French journalist and filmmaker Sylvie Levey spent five years, from 2001 to 2006, documenting a Shanghai family whose home was to be demolished. The 92-minute documentary, "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," which is in both English and French, reveals some of the major changes that result from urbanization, and how some average Chinese cope with those changes. Levey's documentaries on China have won her many awards overseas. She has been called the "third eye watching China". Recently our reporter had an interview with her.

乐诗薇，一个来自法国的女记者，用自备的摄像机，历经5年时间记录了一个即将拆迁的上海家庭的生活。这部名为《等待天堂的日子》的纪录片历时92分钟，它反映了城市化带来的一些主要变化，以及普通中国人如何应对这些变化。关于中国的一些纪录片为乐诗薇在海外赢来很多奖项，她也被称为用“第三只眼看中国”的人。最近本刊记者对乐诗薇进行了一次专访。

Women of China (WOC): How did you come up with the idea for "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise"? Why did the filming take five years, as opposed to 2 years?

Levey (SL): I got the idea when my friends, the Wang family, informed me one day, in 2001, that their home was to be demolished, for the modernization of Shanghai. The Wang family, residents of Fangbang Road, had been my friends for more than two years. Wang Faxin, the father, was my tailor. At first, I thought the Wang's would be angry ... However, it

was more of a matter of face to be saved for them; they preferred to hide from me how much they "HATED" their 20 square meters, the family's matong (wooden chamber pot), and the total lack of privacy in their collective attic bedroom! In fact, it took them two more years before they finally confessed their "hate" for "Fangbang" in front of my camera.

In the beginning, I had thought the Wang's had loved their home as much as I did — their home was very exotic to me in a way ... I would spend hours there, sharing a cup of green or chrysanthemum tea and having some delicious lunches or dinners. Sometimes, I preferred to do my work at their place, as opposed to my own, larger apartment, located on Gaoyou Road. There, I would sit at the Wang's *majiang* (Chinese game) table and write the synopsis of my future reports or films about China. In their tiny house, I could feel so deeply the warmth of a true and lovely Chinese family, far away from the cruel solitude of being a single foreign reporter and/or filmmaker who had moved alone to China in February 1999, on a cold Saint Valentine's Day no less!

This film portrays the implosion of the traditional family structure after the arrival of globalization. In other words, it is an intimate film about an average Chinese family (observed on just a few square meters)

with a universal dimension. Nobody ever did this before, except, of course, decades ago, through his prodigious novel, *Four Generations Under the Same Roof*, by Lao She.

Despite my Sinologist degree from the famous university in Paris called LANGUES O (The Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations) ... as well as my familiarity with Chinese society, due to the different reports and books I had already written, I confess that I never learned as much as I did about China, and human nature, than I did with the Wang family.

As for the long duration of the filming, I had mistakenly thought, in 2001, when I first began to film the Wang family, the process would take only a few months. Little did I know it would take five years. This was because the demolition did not occur right away.

WOC: What did you enjoy about filming "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise?" What did you dislike?

SL: What I enjoyed most about the filming were the true and genuine relationships I had with the characters. The Wang's have been my friends since 1999. Our deep friendship continued to be very enjoyable, like a foundation on which a beautiful castle is built. Of course, the fact I spoke their language, even with lots of mistakes, was both essential and magical. There was no translator between us, nothing! Just

life, saved once in a while on my DV tapes.

What I suffered the most, was solitude. For weeks and months, I was submerged in the lives of the people on Fangbang Road. Sometimes, it got to the point where I forgot to eat during the day. One of the results of this excessive filming "mission" was that I just couldn't go back to my "normal Western life," with Western people ... I was (except with some of my dearest friends downtown) totally cut off. I was so much a part of and in love with another world that was about to disappear forever. Sometimes, I wished I could have been transformed overnight into one of those ordinary Fangbang people. In that "hypothetic new skin," I was thinking "I won't feel so alone in my beloved China."

Still, I know this apparent solitude — the fact I filmed alone and for such a long time on this other planet called Fangbang Road — was my chance and treasure. I was never really alone; I was always with the Wangs and the Fangbang people. I felt so close to my beloved Shanghai, as if "it," the "city," had become a "he" in a way, like a dear friend, or a dear loved one ... If I hadn't walked alone "into" that adventure, I would have never had that fabulous human encounter with Chinese people and China in general. Never!

WOC: The film took five years to shoot, were there times of uncertainty where

you did not know where the film was going?

SL: The uncertainty about this project for such a long duration is also part of its genuine quality — its own essence. For me, filming a documentary has nothing to do with a news report or fiction. As Fredrick Weisman (a well-known art collector in Los Angeles) said, "you have to take the risk to shoot a lot and follow your instincts. Then, something might happen" ... Or not! But you have to take that risk ... if you trust your feelings, your intuition, then the magic occurs! I filmed 180 hours all together.

I began the filming with a kind of mission of testimony with regard to the future Chinese generations, with regards to the rest of the world, especially Westerners, who so often misunderstand China and its population.

WOC: One of the conditions the Wangs stipulated prior to filming was that the documentary only be shown overseas. Why was the family insistent that the film not be shown in China?

SL: The reality is a bit different ... In the beginning, nobody really believed in the potential of the film. I didn't even look for any producers or broadcasters. Each time I went to visit the Wang family ... I went only with my camera ... It was only after the film started to look like a real film — SCAM (Society of Multimedia Authors) offered me a grant to finish the story, and I finally found

a suitable producer, Olivier Mille of Artline Films — that I needed the Wangs to sign a certificate indicating that they knew I was filming them. They agreed. They said, as they "hadn't had the chance to move into a new modern apartment," they hoped the film would not be shown on Chinese TV (possibly to save face, as they hated so much their living conditions on Fangbang Road!).

Now, things have changed. The Wangs have finally moved into their "modern paradise on earth." It is an "apartment even larger than your own place," as they love to tell me, with a big smile of victory. Around the end of the editing of the film, I went for the first time to their new apartment. And guess what they told me when they opened the door to welcome me, "Sylvie, from Fangbang Road, we have kept NOTHING!" And they laughed to tears, giving me big hugs, so proud of their new "skin"... I suddenly realized they had really taken (thanks to the Communist Party/the Chinese Government) the "social elevator" as one says in French. Within a few weeks, they changed, even putting some weight on, dressing differently, behaving a bit differently, just like the "bourgeois." A beautiful miracle, I must say. I took a few pictures with a tiny camera, which I finally decided to add to the film credits of "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," their happy ending.

Maybe now they won't mind

if the film is shown in China, I owe them so much! I am sure they will realize how important they have been in this "discovering" of China, through their life, by a foreign audience. My brother, Christian Levey, a businessman in Paris, who usually is not so fond of my films to tell you the truth, after he watched the Wangs' story, said, "Sylvie, thanks to this story, I have at last the feeling that I understand quite well the Chinese people. In a way, we are so similar to them. I just love them. And, besides, your film has a real universal dimension."

WOC: Why are you called "the third eye watching China?"

SL: I have been living in China for nine years already. According to Chinese culture, the number "nine" means eternity. In a way, I feel like I have known China forever. Besides the fact I have been to 26 provinces already ... I am more familiar with China than the country where I was born. How to put it? I just feel more "at home" in China than in France ... If I am not Chinese ... and if I still belong culturally to the other planet, the Western world, after having "interted so deeply into the Chinese one," I already changed a lot with regard to the person I used to be before this fabulous intellectual and human encounter with China. I will never be the same again. Never! Each time, I go back to Europe

... I feel different. I clearly feel I already don't belong 100 percent to France any more. As a matter of fact, in a way, I can also observe the country where I used to grow up ... with a certain distance, a kind of objectivity. The "third eye" again...

One of the main reasons ... is the fact that I speak Mandarin, which gives me the chance to communicate directly with Chinese people. Of course, my European accent is still strong, my tones are rarely correct and I still make lots of mistakes, in terms of building the structure of my Chinese sentences. Still, being able to speak Chinese is just permanently magical. I can read "this permanent miracle" on Chinese people's faces. It is the "precious key" that opens their minds and hearts, and probably one of the reasons why I am sometimes called "the third eye" by some media.

WOC: Your film, "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," was recently selected to be shown at Etonnant Voyageurs, an international cultural event that takes place every year in your hometown of Saint-Malo. How do you feel about being the only director, out of the 10 documentaries selected, whose film is about China?

SL: It means so much to me, to a point, you cannot imagine. I was born in Saint-Malo (located in Brittany, in northwestern France), and without Saint-Malo, I might not be answering your questions today. When I was a little girl, I was reading my first book about China at a public library

in Saint-Malo. It was *East Wind, West Wind*, by Pearl Buck, the Nobel Laureate in Literature, who grew up in China. I was just fascinated by this remote, yet familiar, civilization. Strange, wasn't it? Something had happened to me then that determined the rest of my life ... I promised myself that one day I would "do something" with China.

And here I am, decades later, living in China (Shanghai), traveling back to Saint-Malo to participate the 19th session of Etonnant Voyageurs. It is a unique festival, to where more than 300 authors, artists and film directors are invited from all over the world. This year, the theme is about migrations, exile and otherness ... To me, each time we speak a language other than our mother tongue, we get an extraordinary chance to enter into a new mental universe ... The "otherness," "We," and/or "I," might even discover thoughts or feelings through new words, which don't even have the equivalence in our own language. In a way, being able to get into this "otherness" helps you discover more about the others, as well as the mysterious and unknown parcels of yourself. Thanks to Etonnant Voyageurs in Saint-Malo, lots of "third eyes" will gather together ... and China, through "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," should open this 19th session of the screening of documentary films. ■

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