

Zooming in on home truths

Sylvie Levey spent five years filming a family's transition from their rotting downtown Shanghai home to a new apartment in Pudong. Along the way, she found the city's charming old areas can be unlivable for residents, as Xu Wei reports.

French film maker and journalist Sylvie Levey didn't expect that her sojourn in Shanghai would be so long. When she arrived in the city on a chilly Valentine's Day night in 1999, she brought eight cases of books in the hope of writing a book about China.

Similarly, when she started to document the experiences of an ordinary Chinese family awaiting relocation to a new home because their neighborhood was being demolished, she didn't expect it would take five years to finish.

During the period between 2001 and 2006, three generations of the Wang family living under the same roof in a cramped apartment on Fangbang Road M, like many others in such downtown conditions, went through emotional ups and downs during a long relocation process. Now, the family of four have happily settled in a new, bigger apartment in Pudong.

Levey's 92-minute documentary film "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," through which she shared the family's hopes for a new start, their fears, laughter and tears, has been released both in France and China, to critical and popular acclaim.

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It was recently presented at a special screening at Xintiandi's UME International Cineplex as part of the "DocuChina" project by Shanghai's Documentary Channel where acclaimed documentary works about China are shown on two Fridays of each month.

Levey is now working on a book based on the production experience of this documentary.

"For the first time, I delved so deeply into human life," Levey recalls. "That was my most beautiful journey. I shot the film without using a third party, so my relationship with them was direct. I was like a member of their family, and that's why the film is so strongly subjective: their view became my view."

Like many expats in the city, when she took on this project she felt sad, sometimes anguished, about the rapid disappearance of Shanghai's old charm, especially the old wooden houses the Wangs

lived in.

"At times, I was obsessed with these streets and even dreamed of finding a millionaire to rescue them from demolition," she says. "But a new big home is actually what the Wangs wanted. Just like what the city undergoes, the family also experienced a metamorphosis, from a caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly."

Levey's camera follows the daily routine of the Wang family, from the grandma's afternoon nap, to the father's busy tailoring job to the little girl doing her homework.

At first she hoped to "save" and retain the beauty of old Shanghai through words and images in case it vanished in time.

However, after spending more time with the family, Levey found that her opposition to demolition was not fair to the family. She realized it was difficult for anyone to live in such conditions with the unique Chinese chamber pot, the *matong*, and a tiny bedroom attic to share between three generations.

"In scorching summer days, the family's only hope was to have a bath at a bathroom by themselves," Levey says. "The house was so old that the wood was rotting. Though it had a unique old charm, the Wangs were tired of living there."



Scenes from "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise"



Left: Wang's family at the dinner table.
Above: A few days before demolition on Fangbang Road M.