

WHAT IS TO LEAVE

published in *Arts of the Working Class*, March 2019

“Migration” has always been a loaded word, these days it’s more a smoking gun. The force of this word has closed European borders. It has facilitated the election of a man who, in my home country, thinks building a literal wall will deter migrants from the south. It shows the repercussions of ideological failures, obvious in the exodus from Venezuela, once Latin America’s richest country.

Kimberly Bradley

We flee war or environmental devastation; we migrate to look for better lives. About a century after my ancestors rode steerage on a ship to America, I migrated back to where some of them came from¹ when I first caught the scent of the American dream’s death. As a news reporter, I’ve since seen thousands of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghani and other refugees move through my chosen hometowns of Vienna and Berlin in search of a haven far from deadly turmoil—I was on site when 15,000 of them arrived in a Vienna train station from Budapest in fall of 2015. I’ve even watched an astonishing influx of New Yorkers move to Berlin for reasons just like my own, and always take bets on how long their stays might last.

Yet the most dramatic migration I’ve witnessed was not transborder but domestic; not due to war but another variety of precariousness and yearning: in 2011, I briefly lived in Chengdu, China, and saw what happens when nearly 400 million Chinese travel home for Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), a 15-day holiday whose effects start long before and last long after the event itself. In China, home for the holidays means a respite from what I discovered was exploitative labor few know in the Global North.

THE GREAT MIGRATION

The Year of the Pig began on February 5, 2019; but three weeks before the auspicious event, Chinese train and bus stations, even airports were thronged with lines of people writhing around blocks simply to buy tickets home. This year about 400 million Chinese will travel domestically, with another 7 million traveling abroad. A few predictions before the final numbers are tallied in March: road trips will hit 2.46 billion, train trips 413 million. Air travel will see 73 million journeys, and air routes nearly doubling in frequency and number during this period, compared to the rest of the year.

The annual travel glut has been called the world’s greatest migration; retail outlets close, and municipal services become sporadic for up to three weeks. Chinese cities essentially become ghost towns. “People on the outside really cannot comprehend the impact of Spring Festival on every-

¹ I’m northern Irish, Norwegian, German and semi-Ukrainian; the part of the family that lived for nearly 200 years in Ukraine migrated there from what is now east Germany and originally lived in a German colony, yet ultimately, apparently, intermarried with locals.

day life in China,” American journalist Evan Osnos, then based in Beijing, told me back in 2011.

This is true. I saw unspeakably large crowds and read of people who’d waited 20 hours for a ticket. I saw the economic disparity between those who could afford the bullet train, or not. I saw open-bed trucks loaded with people and their belongings – human-body size denim knapsacks and often a plastic basin carried in the hand, the kind you might wash a baby in. I found out that the migrant workers working three shifts on construction sites of the skyscrapers shooting up like weeds in most Chinese cities, were essentially homeless — these basins were how they washed themselves while living in tents near their workplaces.

Many of the workers who go home for Spring Festival never return to their jobs. “This is more than just a New Year’s Eve on the calendar,” Osnos told me back then, explaining how people coped with working 80 hours a week with no weekends, for months. They just leave and then get another job in a highly transitory, exploitative labor market after an extended Spring Festival. “For a lot of people, it’s a complete reset.” I would find this out the hard way.

THE NANNY

Ah-Zhen was half-Tibetan. She spoke little English. Her only experience with kids was with her brother’s sons. My alarm bells went off, but not even three days in, I knew Ah-Zhen was the Asian Mary Poppins. Every morning she appeared, beaming, and Iona squealed and did a toddler version of *The Twist*. Our nanny was so fun and energetic that my 18-month-old daughter Iona forgot about separation anxiety. I started wondering about this girl from Yunnan province. Since English-language queries about anything besides poo and naps resulted only in shrugs and giggles, details emerged only slowly. I found out that she’d started working at 14. She’d run two open-storefront shops, one selling snacks, another clothing. She was now a guide for tourists in Lijiang, the ancient city near her hometown of Shangri-la, but was available to us because winter business was slow. She was the envy of the guesthouse staff, who considered her nanny salary high (we paid her 240 euros a month, plus her room at about 50 euros a month; which we thought was incredibly low but locals said was high and to not go higher) and the job easy.

I thought about her bigger picture: What kind of chances did a young woman like Ah-Zhen have in Chinese society? How did she cope with being half-Tibetan, which, I would realize, meant being treated like many minorities around the world? Being so good with children, did she want her own? In China, how many children was she allowed to have anyway? As an ethnic minority, the government allowed her two children instead of the usual one, but she wanted only one. She had quick comebacks for the taxi drivers and officials who mocked her background or dark complexion. Her fortitude amazed me, but I also realized, as she texted friends on an iPhone knockoff, that she was just like people her age everywhere.

I showed her pictures of life in the west, and gave her small gifts. I enjoyed being around her, and when I wasn’t, looked forward to telling her things in pantomime.

One day I discovered she'd hand-washed all my underwear, which made me uncomfortable, something she'd never done before and certainly something no one had ever done for me. The next day, Ah-Zhen let us know she had to go home for Chinese New Year ... tomorrow. We realized that hundreds of millions of Chinese went home for this family event in a mind-boggling annual mass migration, and we couldn't say no. She left in a rush, dropping Iona off with me in the guesthouse restaurant, saying she'd be back in two weeks. Then she was gone. "Make sure she comes back," said the guesthouse owner. He told us that his first year, he paid his staff their yearly bonuses and not a single one returned to work. He thereafter paid them half a bonus before Spring Festival, and half after.

I'd forgotten that Ah-Zhen was a migrant worker. A high-end migrant worker, but one just the same. People leaving their homes to work far away were the motor of the Chinese economy's meteoric rise. The ending to this story is sadly predictable. The day after our nanny was due back, we received a message that she was delayed. The next day, and the day after, she was unreachable. I was worried, certain she was stuck on a packed train with millions of migrant workers somewhere deep in the mountains of Yunnan province, my ex wasn't so sure. "She's blown us off. We need to find another nanny for the last month," he said. "No, she'll come back," I said. "I don't think so."

We were sorting out how we felt—mad, hurt, worried—when one of the housekeepers came forward. Her 24-year-old daughter needed a temporary job. Chow Chow came the next day, and Iona immediately ran into her arms.

We never saw Ah-Zhen again.

THE ARTIST

Considering the title of this publication, these facts and anecdotes have plenty to do with the global working class, but what does they have to do with art? Not much, but then again, everything—the gig economy in China is an extreme case of the precarious existence we art-world freelancers know everywhere in the western world. Our Occidental, cultural-producer or text-worker version of zero-contract labor is more sugar-coated, and less mercenary for both job giver and taker, but exists nonetheless. I am neither nanny nor construction worker and am thus acutely aware of my privilege, and perhaps even the odd glamour, of being a member of the proletarian jet-set, but there are moments when I board the easyJet flights between Berlin and Vienna for an adjunct academic position and I realize my role in the web of immaterial migrant labor.²

To bring things to actual art: Not long after I arrived in Chengdu I was surprised to read that Ai Weiwei's Beijing studio was being destroyed, abruptly and without warning. At the time no one knew why. I interviewed a Chengdu artist who suspected that Ai's "protective hand" (a person in the Chinese communist party who'd watched over him, allowing his art and activism without too much censorship or consequence)

² And remember a text by Maurizio Lazzarato that I found myself proofreading on a cheap charter flight. "On the Atypical and Precarious Forms of the Work of Freelance Artists," in: *Chronicles of Work*, Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2015, see: <http://www.chronicles-of-work.de/CoW2/lazzarato.html>. I wonder if Lazzarato has been in China during the Spring Festival migration.

had possibly lost his post. Later that year, a couple of weeks after our departure, the Chinese government detained Ai for 81 days under dubious circumstances, then not allowed to leave China until 2015.

Now Ai lives in Berlin, his studio a short walk from the campus where I teach. Although he represents the pinnacle of art-market value, prolific production, and global recognition, he, too, emigrated in part to find artistic liberty. His newest work looks closely at migration. During the height of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, I was vocal on social media about what I considered Ai's incredibly tone-deaf gestures at drawing attention to the crisis: selfies with refugees on the island of Lesbos, a decadent Berlin film festival dinner in which celebrities wrapped themselves in golden rescue blankets "in solidarity" with those fleeing Middle Eastern turmoil, at a time in which rescue blankets were scarce at the points needed and the very, *very* worst: a self-portrait of the artist lying face-down on a beach in a misery-porn reenactment of the seminal press image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian-Kurdish three-year-old who drowned and washed ashore in Turkey.

Still (disclosure!) about a year later I somewhat accidentally became involved in Ai's documentary *Human Flow*. Unlike his early responses (which I still shudder at) to an ongoing crisis, the film is an ambitious and slower investigation into current politically- and environmentally-driven migration patterns; it's important in that it covers migrant groups on the ground in places like Burma and drought-stricken portions of Africa, but also on the US-Mexican border. It's visually rich and in many sections intimate, telling stories the media's fast pace precludes. I was paid well to proofread on-screen text as a freelancer; I was okay with this (after having had a long think, a look at an early cut, and then a look at my bank account). Having seen how Ai creates a conventional documentary, and considering his work on his home country's conditions and contradictions as his strongest, I would wish that he would someday document China's Great Migrations. Once described to me as "seven lanes of highway traffic, each way, trying to get through a back alley," these recurring "human flows" may not come from a situation that is immediately life-threatening, but their origins and scope are about the artificial, lightning-speed displacement of human labor, and its value ... or lack thereof.

THE NANNY AGAIN, AND THE EMOTIONS OF HUSTLE

I asked people at the Chengdu guesthouse why Ah-Zhen hadn't returned. "She probably got a new job and was too embarrassed to tell you. She didn't want to lose face," said Li at the front desk. "But what about *our* face? And didn't she care about Iona?" I insisted. Li just shrugged. "I know she did, but it's different here. This is our culture."

Culture, yes; and circumstance. I reluctantly recognized that Ah-Zhen's disappearance is part of how contemporary China works. Workers from the countryside, forced by China's turbo-expansion, look for the next thing because they're fired just as easily, and there's nothing left for them in decimated landscapes and rare-earth mine pits. And let's be honest ... we, a western artist and a western writer both trying to gather material with which we could also make some sort of living, were leaving, too. We were temporary, privileged migrants who on some level were exploiting Ah-Zhen with our strong euros, and as much as our daughter loved her and she said she would consider it a "dream," we couldn't take her back with us.

Years later, as western nation-states succumb to quasi-authoritarians and the effects of 2008's financial crash continue to amplify and make hustlers of most of us, I see the homogenization capitalism and consumption creates across regions and ideologies. I remember the throngs of laborers in China escaping oppressive work conditions to see their parents a little longer, and I wonder what, if anything, keeps us human. Is it our kin, our communities? How do we keep them alive as we move around by choice or force? I now live with a young Syrian I met while reporting in Austria; sometimes, after long Whatsapp conversations with his mother in Aleppo, he comes into the kitchen and explains that it only sometimes hits him that he may never see her again.

I still have hope that we remember what connects us. I recall the look on Ah-Zhen's face the day she left to never return; in a rush, with her huge bag, fighting sadness as she bade farewell to my daughter, whom she'd helped transform from baby to little girl.

Then again, maybe that sadness was just me, projecting my own feelings onto a young woman whose life and culture I could only try to understand.