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China 21 -- Press Release

How are ordinary people adapting to China's transformation -- market economics, globalization, small families? *China 21*, a new one-hour documentary, follows four Chinese families as they step into the 21st century. We look over their shoulders as they pick their way through a changing social terrain.

Ruby Yang and Lambert Yam, Americans born in Hong Kong, made *China 21* with compact digital video gear. Professionally invisible, they found they could follow their subjects everywhere -- classrooms, homes, offices and workplaces without external interference.

Today's Chinese family is small -- two kids at most. Neither jobs nor schooling are guaranteed, so parents tend to focus their energies on the children's future. The people in the film aren't afraid to speak out. They see real opportunities. But they also face terrible obstacles. Their problems and hopes add up to a sketch of China's future.

Cast of characters:

Tang Enliang, 19, has realized his parents' fondest hopes by getting into Shanghai's top law school. "Am I spoiled because I'm an only child?" he asks with a smile. "I don't have any siblings, so I'll never know." Tang is a champion swimmer -- tall, broad-shouldered and confident. Lawyers are a novelty in China. But when Tang holds forth on China's future we still hear cautious echoes of official policy: "No society can have absolute freedom. As long as you feel free psychologically and start from there you'll be a free person." The view from his family's balcony is filling up with skyscrapers. Before long they expect to be relocated to the edge of town.

Zhong Qiu is a sweet, serious 6-year-old farm girl in Hunan, a peasant farming province. She lives in a hillside village with her mother, her grandparents and a baby brother (in farm regions the One Child Policy has been relaxed) and walks two hours each way to school. The father has gone off to work in the booming coastal region. Someone needs a job because public schools charge substantial fees. The farmers are gaunt; they grow just enough to eat.

Terry Han, 23, and his girl friend Vivian Chen are steering a course toward American business school. They are stylish, attractive, cosmopolitan. Their doting parents hover in the background, eager to help yet afraid to interfere. Vivian has been living and working in Shanghai without official sanction, like much of the local work force. Terry's parents, formed by the Cultural Revolution, fear she will pay a price. Terry says of them affectionately, "They're still living in the past. For them, security is all that matters."

Zhang Yu is 15, growing up on a small farm near Shanghai, halfway between urban and rural, ancient and modern China. The mother and grandparents grow vegetables on two acres of land. Permitted to have a second child, they produced rambunctious twin boys. The father's state-owned factory is threatening layoffs, and looking for work in the Shanghai region means competing with a flood of rural immigrants. "The government used to give you a job. Now you have to find your own. For uneducated people like me it's really tough." Zhang Yu is also at a crossroads. If she does well in school she might get into college. If not she'll go to vocational school.

The filmmakers made two trips to China, nine months apart. On the second trip they tracked down Zhong Qiu's father at a construction site in Dongguan, living in an unfinished building with 12 other men from his village. He is a shy, good-natured man who sees no prospect of returning home for good. The money he sends home makes a difference, but his family wonders whether the separation is worth it. His brief return to the village, bringing a bicycle, is both a warm reunion and an awkward reminder that the family is in pieces. Gazing at the green hills he says, "I can't see a future for myself here. But is the outside world a better place?" Tang, the prize student, keeps on winning honors, deferring love and marriage. Terry and Vivian put their American dream on hold, applying to graduate school in China. Zhang Yu's father is still holding onto his job, but without an assured future. He and his family decide to rent out their farmland; the mother will look for a job.



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Living with contradictions

From the top of a Shanghai skyscraper China looks a lot like Hong Kong -- an economic success story. But for peasants growing turnips in Hunan, exports and foreign investment promise little -- only an awareness that life is better elsewhere. Zhong Qiu's father and millions of other peasants bend the rules by going to the cities, manning a new economy the government can't control. Terry and Vivian optimistically wait for inconvenient rules to change. Tang Enliang, the prize student, preps for the rough-and-tumble of international business by scrupulously sticking to the rules.

Everyone sees education as the key to a child's success. But the top rung is always out of reach. For peasants it's a high school education. For Shanghai families it's graduate study abroad. Although people don't seem to be oppressed by a tyrannical state, they still worry about forces beyond their control -- developers tearing down old Shanghai, a privileged class which gets the good jobs, an economic plan which writes off large segments of the population.

China 21 is a heartwarming introduction to people whose motives and feelings look very much like ours. It introduces people you will never see on the nightly news, whose spark and initiative are changing China from the grassroots up.

The filmmakers

Director Ruby Yang made *Citizen Hong Kong* (PBS, 1999), about Hong Kong's transition from colonial status to part of China. She edited *A.K.A. Don Bonus*, an Emmy-winning film compiled from a video diary, several other documentaries and two feature films -- Joan Chen's *Xiu Xiu* and *Autumn in New York*.

She is now based in Beijing, directing public service announcements and a wide range of documentary work as part of Chang Ai Media Project (formerly the China AIDS Media Project). One of their films, *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, which she directed, won the 2006 Oscar for Documentary Short Subject at the 79th Academy Awards. Their most recent documentary *Tongzhi in Love* premiered in June of 2008 at Frameline Gay & Lesbian Film Festival. The film won a Golden Gate Award for Best Documentary Short at the 2009 San Francisco International Film Festival.

Her latest documentary *A Moment in Time*, a one-hour documentary about the experience of the Chinese in San Francisco's Chinatown, told through the films they loved, will air on PBS in 2010.

Producer Lambert Yam was her production partner on *Citizen Hong Kong*. He was a veteran exhibitor and distributor of Chinese films in America. He also serves as the producer on *A Moment in Time*.

China 21 was made possible by a grant from the Independent Television Service, with additional support from the National Asian American Telecommunications Association.