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WALK THIS WAY

Journalist Elly Zhang takes us down harrowing memory lane, recounting the heartbreak of filming the Long March documentary *Feet Unbound*

IN 2005, a carefree, party-going Chinese journalist decided to put her best foot forward. And then the other. Again and again.

In 10 months, Elly Zhang had retraced the steps of thousands of young Chinese women soldiers who had taken part in one of modern China's defining moments: The Long March of the Red Army in the mid-1930s.

The results are captured in the moving documentary *Feet Unbound* by Perth-based Singaporean director Khee-jin Ng. Previously screened at last year's Singapore International Film Festival, it begins another run at The Picturehouse tomorrow.

Travelling in an old Mitsubishi Pajero, Zhang, Ng and the rest of the five-man crew drove some 5,000km from Sichuan Province to the Gobi Desert through some of the world's harshest environments, following part of the route taken by Chinese Red Army soldiers when they were being pursued by the Nationalist Kuomintang Army during the country's civil war.

But it isn't the more well-known group of soldiers led by a victorious Mao Zedong that *Feet Unbound* trained its lenses on. Instead, the film follows the tragic — and rarely talked about — path of the Fourth Red Army, which was decimated by Kuomintang allies under the leadership of a vicious warlord named Ma Bufang.

Zhang had previously written a series of stories on the women soldiers as a reporter for the *Beijing Youth Daily*, and Ng approached her for the movie after stumbling upon those stories on the Net. In the documentary, which sees Zhang grappling with her identity as a Chinese woman in modern times, she interviews some of the survivors who are now in their 80s and 90s.

On the phone, the 32-year-old Beijing-based journalist told TODAY that shooting *Feet Unbound* "was a once in a lifetime experience".



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1 **What made you decide to sign up for this shoot?**
The Long March used to be what we called the "official history" of the government, but it gradually became a "people's history". It's not just about the big leaders anymore, but also the common soldiers.

I was also interested in the people of the Fourth Red Army. Their experiences were unique and very tragic. Before they joined the army, they were peasants and after that, they were still peasants — compared to those in the First Red Army who became leaders or eventually led very good lives in Beijing or Shanghai.

2 **What was most difficult in making the film?**
Finding the people. We were lucky to find someone who used to be an enemy of the Red Army. We were in Qinghai, where Ma Bufang used to stay, and Khee-jin suggested we ask around for anyone whose family name was Ma. We were about to give up when we walked into a restaurant and found out the manager was Ma's grand-niece. They were the only family that Ma left behind in mainland China. So, we got to interview her mother.

3 **How was it coming face to face with the "enemy"?**
I felt a little nervous as she was the "enemy". I was worried she would be hostile to us, or would not say anything because it's a really sensitive issue in China. Luckily, we kept talking for four hours. You can imagine she had a very tough life especially after the Communist Party came into power, but she's very positive. When we talked about how Ma's troops killed many Red Soldiers, she said: "Well, it's war. War is about killing people."

4 **In the film, you were trying to light a fire in the middle of a snowstorm when you realised how hard life was for the women soldiers. What was going through your head then?**
We were worried we couldn't get out of the place and the mobile phone had no signal! Two hours before, it was sunny, and then it started snowing heavily.

GRUELLING STUFF: Chinese journalist Elly Zhang traces the steps of women soldiers in the Long March of the Red Army, which she believes is now more of a 'people's history' rather than 'official government history'.

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5 **Any beautiful memories of the shoot?**
Nature — even in the heavy snow you could see the mountains, rivers, Gobi desert, highlands and swamps. I bet it was even more beautiful back then, but the Long March was probably too tough for the soldiers to enjoy the scenery. And how those old women opened up to me. They had a painful life but they got over it. Most of them are illiterate but they are the strongest women I've ever seen.

6 **Any trouble getting them to tell their stories?**
They were very open but Chinese women, after all, are quite reserved. I told one of the women we interviewed, right before we left — off the record — that if we didn't get these sad experiences out, no one would ever know about them. Then she whispered in my ears: "Those soldiers bullied us so badly." In Chinese culture, "bullying" women usually means raping them.

7 **If you could change any part of that particular chapter in Chinese history, what would it be?**
During the shoot, we saw lots of graves with no names. Many soldiers — even a whole troop — died but people couldn't remember who they were. I just want people to know who those dead soldiers were.

8 **Do you think there's any connection between the legacy of the Long March and what's currently happening in Tibet?**
The Tibet issue is another story altogether. But I do think the Long March is about people fighting for a better life. If you don't give up, if you're brave and keep telling yourself that you're brave, you can conquer any hardship.

9 **Has the movie spurred any change in how China views its history?**
No. It hasn't been released in China yet. I think this part of history is still quite sensitive. You can find thousands of books and documents on the First and Second Red Army, but when I went to the national library, I could only find less than five books on the Fourth. And it's been over 70 years.

10 **Is it important that your six-month-old baby girl watches it when she grows up?**
When my kid is old enough to watch it, the Long March would probably be too distant a topic for her. But if she shows interest, I will let her. And if she doesn't, I won't force her. My mother hasn't watched it yet. I forced my dad to watch it, though. But since most of it was in English and had no subtitles, he fell asleep during the movie!

Feet Unbound opens tomorrow at Cathay's The Picturehouse.

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ++++

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION:

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2	5	9	1	6	7	4	3	8
4	3	7	9	2	8	5	1	6
6	8	1	5	3	4	7	9	2

HOW TO PLAY:
The rules are easy. Fill in the grid so that every row, every column, and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 through 9.

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