

# Ghosts—a harrowing and honest depiction of modern slavery

By Robert Stevens  
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*Ghosts*, directed by Nick Broomfield, screenplay by Nick Broomfield and Jez Lewis. Based on articles by Hsiao-Hung Pai.

Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts*, about the fate of undocumented Chinese workers in the UK, is a powerful work. The semi-factual account is constructed around the drowning deaths of 23 Chinese cockle pickers who were caught by incoming tides at Morecambe Bay, England in February 2004.

Shown at the Sundance film festival in the United States in January, it was the first film to be screened at the 2006 San Sebastián International Film Festival, whose main theme was immigration.

The film is something of a departure for Broomfield, who is normally associated with documentaries in which he takes a confrontational role, often in front of the camera. His previous efforts include two feature-length documentaries about the South African fascist Eugene Terreblanche. He also directed *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, about Aileen Wuornos, who was found guilty of killing seven men in the US. The film explored her case and its exploitation by the mass media. It included footage revealing her to be insane at the time of her execution.

*Ghosts* is a slang term used by the Chinese to describe Caucasians, but in the context of the film it is also a description of the army of immigrants who are forced to undertake the most menial and low-paying jobs whilst remaining hidden from official society.

The inspiration for *Ghosts* came from a series of articles on the Morecambe Bay tragedy by journalist Hsiao-Hung Pai featured in the *Guardian*. During his research for the subject, he went undercover as an undocumented worker.

*Ghosts* centres mainly on the experiences of the fictional character Ai Qin—a brilliant and touching performance from Ai Qin Lin—as a young single mother who reluctantly leaves her home village in the poverty stricken Fujian Province to become an illegal immigrant in England.

Most of those who died at Morecambe Bay were from the province and Broomfield employed non-professional actors mainly from this region for the film. All the other actors in the film were non-professional.

Ai Qin Lin was herself an illegal immigrant who undertook a

four-and-half-month journey to England on a false passport in 1998. She arrived in England via Moscow, Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Holland. At just 21 years of age she was forced into a series of low-paid jobs, including at a garment factory where she was paid £2.50 an hour and worked 80 hours a week, in an attempt to pay back her massive debts. She was then separated from her son for more than five years (he was sent back to China as she was unable to provide for him) as she struggled to come to terms with a life of brutal toil and exploitation. She now has legal status to stay in England with her son, with whom she was reunited in China during the making of the film.

Ai Qin Lin commented on her own experience: “No one wants to take a risky route. But what alternative have we got? We Fujianese don't stand a chance of getting a proper visa—the British government sees us as bogus. There was simply no legal means to enter Britain.”

Ai Qin Lin came from Jinfen, a small town near Changle, in Fujian Province where most of the 30,000 population is under the age of ten or over 60. According to Hsiao-Hung Pai, many of the young adults in the town are in the process of or have already been smuggled abroad. It is estimated that there are more than 70,000 Chinese illegally working in Britain alone.

Prior to shooting the film, Broomfield and Lewis spent several weeks in China researching and trying to find somebody to play the lead role. The director has recounted in the *Guardian* how he was unprepared for the “incredible poverty” he found: “I suppose it's how the Industrial Revolution was here, but on a much greater scale. What I certainly didn't expect was for China to be quite so blatantly headed for the West. I still thought of it as a socialist economy; in fact, it's more like a capitalist dictatorship.”

Due to its honest portrayal of poverty in China and the inclusion of scenes revealing the criminal underworld of human trafficking, this research also took on an “illegal” form.

The opening moments of the film show scenes of village life and a clip of screen text tells us that the average worker earns just a few dollars a month. We then see Ai Qin eating at a table with her family. They are embroiled in a discussion about the pros and cons of Ai Qin having to leave China, seen as the only way she will ever be able to take care of her child or have

enough money to get married. Shedding tears, Ai Qin comes to the realisation: “I can’t make a living here.”

Having been loaned the \$25,000 needed for her to travel illegally to Britain by family and the local “snakeheads”—human trafficking gangs—she sets off. Her arduous six-month journey sees her smuggled from country to country hidden in the sealed-off, dark compartments in the backs of trucks and lorries.

Arriving in England Ai Qin is forced by Chinese gang members into the hands of the local gangmaster, Mr. Lin (Zhan Yu). The film pulls no punches in portraying the terrible exploitation the Chinese workers face. At every turn they are met with naked profiteering and corruption from gangsters, officials and employers. Forged documents and bribery are used by Mr. Lin to obtain work from the local employment agency for Ai Qin and the others. They work long tiring shifts in meatpacking plants before walking back to the house through deserted streets in the early hours of the morning. Ai Qin and her friend are shocked to find their wage slip is much lower than they had been led to expect. They are informed that they are paying “taxes” levied at a rate of 44 percent and that there is nothing they can do about it.

These scenes reflect the research carried out by Hsiao-Hung Pai. As he told the *New Statesman*, “It took me more than two weeks to get the work-permit photocopy and the contact number for the recruiter in Norfolk that would enable me to enter this hidden world.

“There, in the country town of Thetford, I witnessed almost unbelievable exploitation. Legitimate British agencies were taking advantage of the unauthorised status of workers, employing them as a half-price army of labour to run the food-processing factories that supply supermarkets. I witnessed how these men and women risked their health and safety to improve the lives of their families, how they struggled from day to day with ruthless exploitation in a first-world country. They lived in social isolation, suffering constant insecurity and anxiety.”

In the aftermath of the Morecambe Bay tragedy, press attention was largely focussed on the role of the gangmasters involved in the cockling industry. Only one person was ever called to account for the deaths of the 23 Chinese cockle pickers—the gangmaster himself, Lin Liang Ren, who was given a 14-year prison sentence. Following the deaths toothless legislation was introduced, supposedly to regulate gangmasters and to ensure they were licensed.

In *Ghosts* the gangmaster, Mr. Lin, works alongside Ai Qin and the other illegal workers picking crops, cockles, etc. Although he is happy to make a living from the sweat of the labour of the Chinese immigrants, he also lives in the same house as them, and is under the control of an English gangster to whom he pays rent, after taking his own cut.

Broomfield goes further still, shifting attention away from the role of the “parasitic” middlemen in the exploitation of the

workers onto the role of the supermarket giants.

He told the *Times*, “I wanted to do a film about modern slavery. It’s ironic that, 200 years since the abolition of slavery, there are more slaves than there ever have been, just in a different form. I also felt it was interesting that so many illegals were working in the production of food, most of which is for the supermarkets. Somehow this is able to go on in this country, which prides itself on civil rights. I was horrified by what I learnt in making this film.”

The supermarket chains are engaged in a constant “price war” that is based on maximising profits at the expense of both their suppliers and their customers. Enormous pressure is placed on farmers to drive down the price that the major food retailers pay for agricultural produce.

Britain’s food retailing is the most concentrated in Europe. The top five chains—Asda, Morrison, Sainsbury and Tesco—control over 70 percent of all food purchased. Tesco’s revenue for the 52 weeks to February 25, 2006 was £38.259 billion. It is now the largest British retailer by both global sales and domestic market share and is the world’s third-largest grocery retailer. Such is the grip that the supermarkets have over the retail of food in the UK, it is estimated that nationally one in every £8 spent is in a Tesco store.

The final scenes of *Ghosts* are harrowing, in which the soon to be fatally trapped workers are forced to work at night. The desperation and helplessness on their faces, as they try to call their families as the tide rushes in, leave an indelible memory.

The Blair Labour government has washed its hands of the tragedy. To this day it has refused to help the families of those who died at Morecambe Bay pay back their debts, amounting to a total of £500,000.

Broomfield has responded by setting up his own fund. In making *Ghosts*, he has produced a drama that, whilst shaped by the tragic events in Morecambe Bay, has a more universal motif. In lifting the lid on the terrible hardship, exploitation, state-sanctioned racism and general misery facing immigrant workers, *Ghosts* highlights a situation replicated throughout the supposedly “advanced” capitalist nations of the world.

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