

Hao Jingfang

"The New Year Train"

[An office. A reporter faces the camera.]

Reporter: This is a special live report jointly conducted by Old China News Agency, Chinese Peripheral TV, and the People's Network. We're in the thick of the Spring Festival travel season—the greatest annual human migration on Earth—when hundreds of millions trek by plane, train, and bus to visit their loved ones. The unprecedented mass disappearance of all passengers on the experimental train *Homeward Bound* has captured the attention of the whole nation. A single name, Li Dapang, creator of *Homeward Bound* and its operating CEO, is at the eye of the storm. Your correspondent has secured an exclusive interview with Mr. Li.

Welcome, Mr. Li. Let's get down to it. Your train has vanished, and more than fifteen hundred passengers are missing. What do you have to say to our viewers?

Li: They're not *missing*. The train is being repaired.

Reporter: You've heard from them?

Li: No. But my monitoring equipment shows that the train is perfectly fine. This break in communications is only temporary.

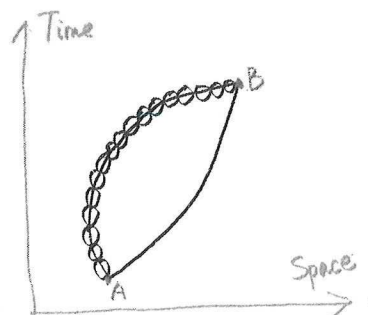
Reporter: Can you explain *Homeward Bound*'s basic principles of operation?

Li: Let's start from the beginning. I had a dream, a simple but beautiful dream, of giving everyone the chance to visit their loved

ones on Chinese New Year, without long lines, without waiting in the cold, without being packed in like sardines—

Reporter: Please, Mr. Li, can you get to the point?

Li [*Taking out a piece of paper and drawing for the camera*]: This is our space-time continuum. To go from one point in space-time to another point, we usually follow a brachistochrone curve, also known as a line of fastest descent. Like this, all right? But if we can use miniature black holes to change the local gravitational field, it would be possible to start from one point and reach the other point by following a completely different space-time curve. Best of all, we could depart from point A and arrive at point B—that is, at the same time and in the same place—by following multiple, different curves. Thus, by adding more possible paths to the continuum, we can double, triple, quadruple, even centuple the carrying capacity of any method of transportation. Do you see?



Reporter: . . . I see something that looks like a dumpling.

Li: I mean, if you want to be technical about it, we're really creating local lines of fastest descent, and then we string these local curves together—

Reporter: Let's set the math aside for now. Can you tell us more about the missing passengers? Where *is* the lost train?

Li: It's at another point in the space-time continuum.

Reporter: Are you . . . are you talking about a parallel universe?

Li: No! Just another point in the space-time continuum. It's contemporaneous with us, but at another location. It's colocated in

the same site as the people who're already there, but in a different time.

Reporter: . . . I think it's best we stop talking about theories. Let me ask you a different question: prior to this accident, *Homeward Bound* was not licensed by the relevant authorities. You were selling tickets illegally, weren't you?

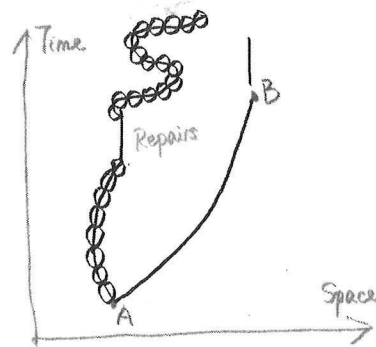
Li: The transportation market is dominated by inefficient monopolies. We had no choice but to push the regulatory framework to Uberize space-time to better serve the people.

Reporter: What do you think will happen to *Homeward Bound* after this incident? Will you be shut down?

Li: Let's wait and find out the fate of the train first.

Reporter: Do you think the passengers will return safely?

Li: I'm sure they'll be fine. All they need to do [*taking out another sheet of paper and drawing again*] . . . is to find a new space-time curve. They'll end up reuniting with us at our coordinates in the continuum.



Reporter: . . . I see a poorly made dumpling that hasn't been sealed properly.

[*The director, who is behind the camera, interrupts the interview by informing the reporter that the missing train has been found and all passengers are safe.*]

Both the reporter—a bit stunned—and Li Dapang stare at the breaking news on the wall-mounted TV. The TV shows passengers

getting off Homeward Bound. Their expressions are serene—actually, maybe even delighted.

A reporter on the platform stops a passenger to ask about her experience.

“It was great! We traveled for so many days, and when we got out, we found out it’s not even New Year’s yet!”

The reporter stops another passenger to ask if he had been scared.

“Not at all! We just had an unexpected vacation on the train.”

The shocked reporter grabs the conductor and asks for details.

“The train had some mechanical difficulties, which didn’t take long to fix. But the passengers demanded that we take the scenic route so that they could enjoy more time on the train before arriving at the final destination.”

The reporter doesn’t know what to do.

Back to the office.]

Li: This is easily explained. Although the train has traversed only a single day in the space-time continuum, the total length of the route it traveled in the continuum was much longer, and the biological clocks of the passengers ticked along at the usual rate. Thus, despite the fact that from our perspective it seems the train has been missing for only six hours, the passengers feel they’ve spent many days on the train.

[The rest of the segment consists of talking heads debating government transportation policy, legal issues, and train technology. No clear consensus emerges on any topic.

The camera is shut off, and the reporter packs up. Before leaving Li Dapang’s office, however, he turns to the entrepreneur with a few more questions.]

Reporter: Why did those passengers want to stay on the train? It doesn’t make sense to me. Don’t people who visit family for Chinese New Year want to get there as quickly as possible?

Li: I can’t answer that. You’ll have to ask the passengers themselves. But think about this: if the starting point and the destination are already set, and if no matter how many days it takes

to get there, you'll arrive on time, then wouldn't you want to prolong the trip as much as possible to enjoy it?

Reporter: I guess so. It's like free time.

Li: It's simple when you put it like that, right? What doesn't make sense to *me* is this: lots of times, when the starting point and the destination are fixed—say, birth and death—why do most people rush toward the end?