王兵 Wang Bing

精选文章 Selected Articles

专栏 | 王兵：没有更多的选择

文/刘伟伟

2018.09.12

ARTFORUM
艺术论坛

王兵，《死灵魂》，2018，彩色，有声，496分钟。刘伟伟在家翻拍。

今年8月2日我从网上下载看了王兵拍摄的《死灵魂》（2018）。我本来联系了王兵，要给他做一个采访，可是我看了这部纪录片之后，觉得有点不知道跟他来聊什么了。这是一部漫长、冷静和专注的纪录影像，大量当事人的口述，夹杂着黄土沙尘，把61年前那段反右历史中夹边沟的部分呈现出来。网上有人把这部记录影像同克劳德·朗兹曼的《浩劫》（1985）联系起来，可能是由于两部片同样作为某种历史指认与它们的超长片时。我认为两部影像所涉及的人群和问题，在所处社会语境方面的遭遇有根本性差异：《浩劫》里发生的种族灭绝大屠杀起码是个被正视承认和公开明证的档案，而作为众多劳教营地之一的夹边沟，这里面发生的惨绝人寰的情况，直接涉及到当时的反右运动——时至今日，官方仍然觉得这是一场有必要的运动，甚至是“是完全正确和必要的”（1981年在十一届六中全会上给反右运动定性）。这种政治定性并未给右派彻底平反，只是承认了“反右派斗争被严重地扩大化了。”这场隔离并监禁了55多万人，涉及当时全国500多万知识分子的运动发生后，权力体系开始通过各种审查和劳教，直接砸断了知识分子的政治脊梁骨。从历史脉络来说，反右运动导致当时中国残存的自由主义思想的终结，也为日后发生的种种政治运动灾难埋下了伏笔。

1957到1958年，约有3200名右派分子被送到甘肃夹边沟进行劳动教养，其中大多数在该农场劳教时因饥饿或处罚而死。“百分之五”、“明水”、“夹边沟”、“吃野草”、“黄蒿子”、“草籽糊糊”、“浮肿”、“无法站立”、“人吃人”“饿死”等等，这些不断从夹边沟或者其他劳教场的幸存者嘴里说出的词语，重新构建了今天的观众未曾见过，也不知道怎么去想象的现场。这些带着屈辱与饥饿的词语，是一场对布满了死亡肌理的深渊凝视。这些简单、直接、具体，不厌其烦重复的描述，其实都在指认着那个基本事实：一场发生在西北戈壁地带，时至今日都无法被公开说明的集体监禁和死亡事件。每一个幸存者回忆起的名字，他们尸骨甚至还满含冤屈地暴露在夹边沟的黄沙里。甚至在片中，当一群幸存者去收集那些骨头，“每人都捐了一点钱”，来试图建立一个纪念碑的时候，又遭遇了“省上作怪”，“省上给打电话说了”，直接用推土机把它当“违章建筑”给推除了。某种程度上来说，这些幸存者的证据指认与现实遭遇，在今天的中国社会现场，仍然以另一种掩埋事件式的方式存在着，如地震中的豆腐渣工程，或最近爆发的疫苗事件，深圳工人维权事件等等，无一不是政府承诺的调查最终石沉大海，或者从媒体中销声匿迹。

王兵，《三姊妹》，2012，彩色，有声，153分钟。

在《死灵魂》完成之前，王兵就相关题材发表过《和凤鸣》（2007）和《夹边沟》（2010）。而《死灵魂》的拍摄开始于2005年，王兵用了多年的时间搜集记录了120多名劳教营幸存者口述和相关生活片段。《死灵魂》的素材本源，更像是导演在处理前两个影像时所做的调查记录资料。这部记录影像完成之后，王兵关于这个题材的探讨形成了一个相对完整的证据链：《和凤鸣》细嚼慢咽的个体讲述，《夹边沟》电影里的记录与排演，以及这部《死灵魂》群像式的对记忆的抢救。他曾在一次访谈中提到：“夹边沟的核心是大多数死去的人，我们无从知晓那些人的命运，那些人的遭遇，我们不知道有关他们的信息。他们变成了尸骨，在戈壁滩上，风吹日晒，被时间逐渐腐蚀掉了。因为它被称为夹边沟事件，并不是幸存者促成了夹边沟事件，而是那些死难者促成了夹边沟事件。”此次王兵通过一个个具体幸存者的口述串联，在相对封闭的地域环境下，为观众提供了有关事件上的整体认知。这种摆脱叙事干扰，群像式的剪辑呈现，又从微观角度让幸存者带着肉身动荡和片刻不安，一次又一次地把曾经的遭遇和现场，传递给没有经历过那段历史的观众。

王兵记录影像方式的形成，始终贯穿着他某种强迫症式的直觉心理体验。这种直觉直抵镜头前的人物和场景，眼前尽是不加修饰的日常原始记录，甚至是些没有任何指向和解释的“原始时间”。这种直觉体验贯穿了王兵所制作完成的那些影像，不管是关于沈阳工业衰败现场的《铁西区》（2003），还是游荡在云南偏远地区的《三姊妹》（2012），或是直面生命结束的《方绣英》（2017），或是此次记录反右运动灾难结果的《死灵魂》等等。当然，面对中国高风险社会下的动荡与压力，王兵的极端在场，也使他成为中国另一面最好的纪录拍摄者之一。他不妥协不媚俗地扛着摄像机，层层记录下历史和当下发生过的痕迹与现场，也给过往留下了一份有着原始记录和原始时间，关于个体和事件的档案与证据。他的工作某种程度上就是这个时代的监控器。实际上除了去观看与感受，没有任何文字能描述清楚王兵监控器里外这个社会正在面临的撕裂和焦虑，阴冷与痛苦。

在中国，因为缺少言论自由保障和公共放映空间，王兵或者其他独立纪录片工作者的影像很难形成大规模的放映与讨论，这也直接使这些纪录片在事件发生语境地，失去了媒体传播和深入对话的可能。权力的种种限制，更是让一个个真相难以释放出来。这些记录了个体或阶层动荡遭遇然而却无法在地释放的影像，也逐渐形成了一份关于社会运动与反抗的档案明证。这些片子的制作，通常以游击战、贴身战的方式，尽个体最大的可能和勇气来制作完成，然后放在网上或展厅供人观看。——但这种传播也不一定能进行下去，在地放映现场常会惨遭中断，或者主办机构直接被查封。当一种影像作为证据的时候，它承载着的是个体对于事件进行的独立解释与说明。它面临的就是人的问题和真相的问题，没有更多的深意。这些影像往往使用直观的方式，为无聊、无奈和饥渴的观众提供出一份有着时间、地点、人物和事件的认知判断坐标。不管是线上还是线下，对这些影像的围观与阅读，也传递给行动者们一个校对自我与社会位置的自觉时刻。在一个开机或许意味着“犯罪”的社会现场，在一片法律都未必能保障个人权利的土地上，作为想跟自我或社会继续搏斗下去的个体，好像除了继续拍下去，行动下去，没有更多的选择。

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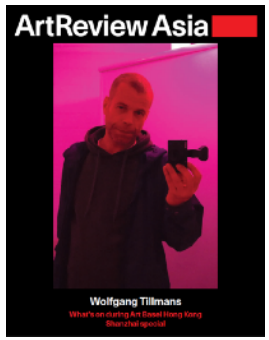
Out of the Shadows

The films of Wang Bing

— Benny Shaffer on the work of the leading Chinese documentary filmmaker

By Benny Shaffer



Features
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The opening scene of Wang Bing's directorial debut, the nine-hour documentary *Tie Xi Qu* (*West of the Tracks*, 2003), is shot from a slow-moving train through the snowflake-covered lens of a digital video camera. Accompanied by the low roar of wheels on frozen, rusted rails, the camera navigates a landscape of dilapidated factory buildings in a once-booming, now rapidly declining industrial zone in northeast China. This point of departure for Wang's career echoes the overlapping histories of early cinema and industrial modernity, intimately tied to trains and the particular forms of visual experience that moving images produce. While early cinema often celebrated the magic of the cinematic apparatus and the modern technologies of industrialisation, Wang's films casts a melancholy gaze on industry's decay. Over the course of his career, he has documented vanishing worlds and lived spaces in their most unadorned forms; yet his investigative and immersive approach has remained unsentimental and understated in its implicit critique of China's social realities.

Born in 1967, Wang Bing grew up during the Cultural Revolution and later witnessed how his country's reform-era experiments with capitalist production took a toll on citizens who struggled to adapt to the change. The arc of his career, which began during the late 1990s, was closely aligned with the rise of digital video as an accessible and mobile technology, one that enabled him to document the social worlds of marginalised individuals in ways previously unseen in mainstream cinema and broadcast journalism in China. Wang has long been recognised as a significant director by the international cinema community and is no stranger to the festival circuit, while a recent retrospective of his films as part of Documenta 14 illustrated his embrace by the contemporary art world. Yet his films have rarely been publicly screened in his home country, where for the better part of two decades he has worked to document those who labour precariously against the backdrop of dramatic social transformation.

ACROSS HIS MANY FILMS, HIS SIGNATURE OBSERVATIONAL STYLE HAS NOT MERELY BEEN A PASSIVE MODE OF QUIET NONINTERVENTION, BUT AN ACTIVE WITNESS TO THE HISTORIES OF THOSE ROCKED BY CHINA'S TUMULTUOUS WAVES OF CHANGE

above and facing page 15 Hours (stills), 2017
digital film, colour, sound, 900 minutes.
Courtesy the artist and Magician Space, Beijing

A 2017 exhibition at Magician Space in Beijing, *Experience and Poverty*, marked Wang's first solo show in China. Transposing his cinematic works into the space of the gallery, the opening coincided with the Beijing government's campaign to forcibly remove millions of the so-called 'low-end population' from the city. The resonance was eerie: in a 2017 interview in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Wang stated that 'cinema is not about composition or colour, but about balancing power dynamics, about continuous change'. For the exhibition, one of Magician Space's white cubes was converted into a black box with rows of theatre seating, inviting the audience into a direct engagement with the durational contours of his practice. A scheduled programme of daily screenings functioned – at least as a gesture – to disrupt the tendency for wandering members of the fast-paced artworld to drift in and out of video installations without viewing the works in their entirety. Across his many films, his signature observational style has not merely been a passive mode of quiet nonintervention, but an active witness to the histories of those rocked by China's tumultuous waves of change.

Yizhi (*Traces*), 2014, single-channel video installation, 35mm film transferred to digital, b/w, sound, 28 min. Courtesy the artist and Magician Space, Beijing

The exhibition featured *Yizhi* (*Traces*, 2014), Wang's first work on celluloid. Using a small stockpile of black-and-white 35mm film – reportedly from the artist Yang Fudong – Wang's roving, handheld camera surveys the unforgiving desert landscape of the Jiabiangou Labour Camp, where thousands of alleged reactionaries and rightists were sent, and later died, during the Mao era. What remains are fragments of bones, liquor bottles and hand-carved Chinese characters on the walls of caves counting down the days and scrawling out gasps for freedom. The film is projected from the ceiling onto the floor, and Wang's physical presence at the site – the same place that inspired his narrative feature *Jiabiangou* (*The Ditch*, 2010) – is apparent in the trembling of the camera in his hands and the sound of heavy breathing. This is a stylistic echo of earlier works such as *San Zimei* (*Three Sisters*, 2012) and *Feng Ai* (*'Til Madness Do Us Part*, 2013), in which an embodied camera also travels through the disorderly terrain of everyday life, framing worlds with an unwavering desire to record and understand the lives of those excluded from power.

Fang Xiuying (Mrs Fang, 2017), which was awarded the Golden Leopard at the 2017 Locarno Film Festival, documents the final week of the protagonist's life with an intimacy that borders on voyeurism. Her days are confined to bed in a bewildered, speechless silence as Alzheimer's lays claim to her body and mind. The contrast between the family members who crowd busily around their matriarch and her powerless paralysis creates a tense, harsh portrait of a domestic space. Beyond the bare walls of the bedroom, we see vignettes from a local world where the pastimes include electrofishing and long rides on dirt roads through endless fields. This patience and attention to detail is equally apparent in *15 Hours* (2017), which witnesses the daily rhythms of work in a textile factory in Zhejiang Province. This gruelling work recalls Wang's *West of the Tracks* in making its main protagonist the factory itself, however many individuals we see working in it. The single-shot, 15-hour video accumulates raw poetic fragments: a glimpse of the English word 'MADNESS' on a worker's T-shirt; the simultaneously deft and mechanical handiwork that pieces together hundreds of pairs of jeans in a single day; the way that light changes over several hours in spaces so vast that their limits vanish. The work extends Wang's preoccupation with the labourers who make possible the nation's economic boom, and who might be left behind by it.

WANG'S PHYSICAL PRESENCE AT THE SITE IS APPARENT IN THE TREMBLING OF THE CAMERA IN HIS HANDS AND THE SOUND OF HEAVY BREATHING

San Zimei (*Three Sisters*) (still), 2012, film, 153 min. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Read More:
https://artreview.com/ara-spring-2018-feature-wang-bing/

In recent years, documentary practices have gained prominence across the expansive field of contemporary art, though Wang's films have rarely aligned with the trends of the moment. While the audience for Wang's work has extended beyond film festivals, his recent validation by the contemporary art establishment points to a broader shift in the role that everyday happenings and their representations play in the artworld. As Hal Foster writes, 'Despite rumors of its disappearance, the real remains with us.' Excavating the real has always been central to Wang's films, and his formal style has, in large part, remained unchanged throughout his career, to the extent that his cinematic approach flirts with aesthetic conservatism. What has changed is the increased visibility that the gallery context and the network of art biennials offer him. There has always been a risk of his films being decontextualised and exoticised when shown to audiences in the West, who might view Wang's China with distanced and fetishised curiosity (though a large community of spectators has never existed for his work in China, where his films lack approval from the censors and cannot be publicly screened).

The fact that Wang been so enthusiastically received by the Western artworld, and only afterwards exhibited in Chinese galleries, reflects a move by the art establishment to confront social phenomena in ways that documentary cinema has been doing for decades (the case of Documenta 14 and its attempts – however limited – to intervene in the discussion around vulnerable populations of migrants in Europe is an obvious example). Across his body of work, Wang has tested the limits of cinema and explored the possibilities opened up through the extreme duration of his works and their unflinching confrontation with social suffering. From its start, filmmakers sought to document labour and industrialisation; Wang's work can be seen as a timely return to that sensibility.

Time Does Not Heal: Inside Wang Bing's Cinema of Slowness

By En Liang Khong

Profile | 29 January 2018

frieze

Father and Sons, 2014, film still. Courtesy the artist

Ahead of a show at Amsterdam's EYE Filmmuseum, how the documentarian's wandering gaze takes in China's landscapes of loss.

The Chinese film expert Shelly Kraicer tells a story about a recurring daydream: he wanders down a narrow Beijing hutong alleyway and finds himself at the 'Chinese Indie Director's Discount Emporium'. Here, you can pick from shelves of long-haired drifters, bleak rural landscapes, sweeping long takes – and a discount deal on shaky DV camera footage. There is no special wisdom to Kraicer's cautionary tale, though it does suggest that a certain formula has taken hold in Chinese independent cinema over recent decades. Since the 1990s, documentarians such as Zhao Liang and Wu Wenguang have dished out uncompromising perspectives on their country's social fractures, from rubble-strewn landscapes caught between destruction and construction to new floating populations of migrant workers. But their favoured use of the small digital camera as a tool for rapid-response, clandestine filmmaking and the relentless chronicling of the dreary lives and labours of China's underclasses, can easily make for clichés.

It was therefore with slight wariness that I entered 'Experience and Poverty', a solo show by the pioneering Chinese documentarian Wang Bing held at Beijing's Magician Space in December. The exhibition, curated by Yang Beichen, hosted seated screenings of two recent films by the director: *15 Hours* (2017) and *Mrs Fang* (2017). The former is a minimally edited, 15-hour continuous shot of the factory floor of a clothing manufacturer in Zhejiang province. The film's forbidding duration mirrors the drawn-out monotony of the workers's long shifts, spent hunched over their cutting machines. If anything, the scene is a tragic update of the old socialist realist aesthetics that celebrated physical mastery over technological might. There is little to signal the presence of the filmmaker and nothing in the way of a soundtrack or additional lighting to temper the factory's brittle, fluorescent ambience. But, if the detached observation of *15 Hours* demonstrates Wang's affinity with the practices of direct cinema, his camera is neither still nor objective. It takes on a life of its own; as a roaming, distracted eye, its attention caught by the whirring of sewing machinery, carving low across the factory floor as it traces the movements of a new subject.

Mrs Fang, 2017, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Originally commissioned for documenta 14, *Mrs Fang* is a 90-minute profile of the last days of Fang Xiu Ying, confined by Alzheimer's to her bed in a Zhejiang village. Wang had originally befriended Fang's daughter while shooting another film in the region in 2015 and returned a year later on hearing her mother had a week to live. Wang's film cuts quickly to a portrait of her elderly human body exposed in its weakest, most uncomfortably intimate state. His camera lingers close over Fang's glazed face, her skin pulled against the skull, and then across her bedroom in which family members have gathered to openly discuss funeral plans and pass comment on Fang's draining life: 'sinking slowly, like a boat in the river'. The film also includes scenes of illegal electrofishing, following Fang's brother-in-law as he casts his nets under cover of night. Wang narrates the sense of destruction and poverty in China's rural south: once famed as 'the land of fish and rice', contemporary Zhejiang is a region in which social welfare and natural resources have leaked away.

Wang was born in Shaanxi province, in China's northwest, in 1967. Even his birthplace, he claims, set him apart from the mythological, epic gaze of China's 'fifth generation' filmmakers: 'I didn't look at the Northwest in the exotic way that Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige did in their film *Yellow Earth* [1984],' he said in a recent interview. Wang graduated from the Beijing Film Academy at a time when millions of workers in state-owned enterprises were being sacked, making way for a new form of class apartheid in China. He arrived in the smokestack Teixi District of China's industrial city Shenyang in 1999 and, over three years, recorded 300 hours of footage with a Panasonic mini-DV camera lent by a friend. It would become his seminal nine-hour trilogy *West of the Tracks* (2003) which documented the laying off of workers, the demolition of their housing and the breakdown of the socialist social contract. *West of the Tracks* opens with a now-famous tracking shot of the district itself, with Wang's camera positioned on a small goods train as it weaves through the factory buildings in a blur of snow: a wandering cipher for the filmmaker himself.

West of the Tracks, 2003, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Where *West of the Tracks* caught a landscape in the process of vanishing, the last decade has seen Wang journey from rustbelt to border region in order to reveal the true costs of the new China. For instance, 2012's *Three Sisters* follows young siblings in a village high in the Yunnan mountains, who are left to fend for themselves when the mother abandons the family and their father is forced to search for work in the city. Wang's camera often wavers, struggling to keep up with the children as they set about their day feeding livestock, gathering dung and potatoes, caught in impoverished labour at a tender age.

Wang's permanent presence on the international film festival circuit - last year he won the Golden Leopard at the 70th Locarno Film Festival - separates his films from the activist-led, investigatory strains of Chinese documentary making. (Consider the fury that Ai Xiaoming and Ai Weiwei breathed into Chinese social cinema in their investigations following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.) But what if we move out from the granular detail of each of Wang's films to its macro-landscape, from the country's disillusioned north-east to its impoverished south-west and across historical time in the process? We begin to see, the film scholar Elena Pollacchi argues, a 'cinematic journey' that traces a sharp counter-geography to the 'China dream'.

Crude Oil, 2008, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Read More:
https://frieze.com/article/time-does-not-heal-inside-wang-bings-cinema-slowness

The subjects, practices and tools of Wang Bing's documentaries may be more easily anticipated these days. But the same is not necessarily true of our experience with them. While Wang's submission to a cinema of slowness purposefully creates difficult encounters in the film theatre, the art-gallery viewer is not governed by the films's durational demands. Next month, Wang's films will be shown at Amsterdam's EYE Filmmuseum (alongside work by Hito Steyerl and Ben Rivers). Here the intention is to display Wang's long-durational film works - including *15 Hours* and *Crude Oil* (2008), a 14-hour study of crude oil extractors in Qinghai province - as a constellation of multiple projection screens. These films will construct a landscape that the viewer can 'edit' themselves by shifting attention from screen to screen, as Jaap Guldemond, EYE's director of exhibitions, tells me. It might be a more fragmented, fleeting sensation but, like Wang's lens, the gallery frees us to linger and wander, and this newly liberated mobility draws attention to the unseen threads between his films. As we begin to idle in the space and sound of Wang's dystopias, can we also glimpse landscapes of possibility resonating beyond?

The 'EYE Art & Film Prize' exhibition at Amsterdam's EYE Filmmuseum will be on view from 24 March through to 27 May 2018.

Looking Back 2017: Beijing

By Carol Yinghua Lu

Opinion | 9 December 2017

frieze

Wang Bing, *Mrs Fang*, 2017, digital video, installation view, Magician Space, Beijing.
Courtesy: the artist and Magician Space, Beijing

Wang Bing, 'Experience and Poverty', Magician Space

18 November 2017 – 31 January 2018

Beijing-based filmmaker Wang Bing has long been an inspiration to the art world for his commitment to documenting some of the most remote, harshest and darkest conditions of contemporary Chinese reality, and portraying them with enormous patience and generosity. In his current show 'Experience and Poverty', which opened in November at Magician Space, we are introduced to two new works – *Mrs. Fang* and *15 Hours*, both commissioned by documenta 14. *15 Hours* records a day's shift for a group of people working in a garment factory in the city of Huzhou, Zhejiang province. Wang films in one continuous take, following the movements of the migrant workers operating within the confined space of the factory floor. Screened in its entirety over two days of the exhibition's run, the film communicates something of the endurance required for this kind of labour. The routines of filmmaker and factory worker temporarily mimic one another together, bridging the gap between viewer and the object of the camera's gaze. Mrs Fang is a more intimate portrait of dealing with a woman nearing death, which follows the relatives and neighbours who care for her in her remote village.

Wang's films, often unedited, require long viewing periods – sometimes 24 hours, sometimes two days. They constantly remind us that to make films – as with all art – takes time as well as empathy and humanity: we should approach reality likewise.

观点 | 表达和记录真实的方法

文/高晓雪

2018.05.17·王兵的《死灵魂》

ARTFORUM
艺术论坛

王兵，《死灵魂》静帧，2018，片长496分钟。
图为受访者高桂芳. 王兵工作室惠允。

五月的戛纳，蓝色海岸的棕榈树下又一轮熙熙攘攘，衣香鬓影，阳光通过镜头和礼服的反射显得更为刺眼。入围特别展映单元的王兵导演这次呈上了一部以单镜头为主要拍摄方式的朴素纪录片《死灵魂》，时长八小时十六分钟，丝毫不顾信息碎片化时代的注意力法则，似乎是一种不合时宜的存在。

这部影片记录了1957年到1961年发生在甘肃省明水滩夹边沟劳改农场的历史事件，但并未提交给观者多少物质性的历史素材来重构彼时的时空。14个被节选出来的右派幸存者在家中接受导演的访问，一系列冷静而程式化的问题开启了受访者的口述，成为主要的叙事线索。另一条线索来自导演对事件发生的地理空间的回访，摄像机跟随导演的脚步回到甘肃明水滩的事件遗址，在荒凉的戈壁边缘的土地上寻找过往的痕迹。随着影片向前推进，我惊愕于如此“局限”的素材所能带来的真实感。一个宏大的历史事件在一段接着一段、长约半小时的访谈口述和间隙性穿插其中的空间回访中层层展开，其接近真实以及记录和表达真实的方式在所谓“后真相”（post-truth）的今天尤其值得讨论。
影片前四个小时的表达相较更贴近导演问题的框架。王兵半结构式访谈（semi-structured interview）的问题单在影片中清晰可辨，一位位口述者根据提问从回忆里翻出自己的经历：事件发生前的社会身份，估测的事发缘由，何年何月以何种方式进入农场，在农场中被部署的岗位和劳动属性，幸存下来的方式和遣返后的生活。一段段回忆沿着一个共同的时间轴（1957年到1961年），通过当年农场里的大伙厨师、小灶厨师、木工、养兔工等人的口述逐渐展开。事发地的地理格局，劳动分工的组织关系作为重叠信息在不同的叙述中反复出现，伴随其浮现的还有一长串藏在或公共或私人的记忆里的数字：三千人，五百人，三百人，五个人，四十斤，二十斤一个月，半斤一天；一系列身心感受：饿，肿，冷，麻木，绝望；各类物件名称：排碱沟，椰枣叶，棉被，虱子；以及大量人名… 它们交织于不同叙述者的话语中，自动生成了事件的高频译码（code），为观者在想象空间里构建当时情景提供了关键信息。镜头一次次对原址的回访影像则成为对上述译码的考证，尽管它所能呈现的地理遗存远非完整。地窝子的格局在黄土高原呼啸寒风的磨砺下仅是依稀可见，而80年代以后新的农业景观更是直接覆盖在了当年的遗迹之上，但大水井、高台火车站等定位信息则无声地确认了陈述中的参照系，数位亲历者在遍野白骨的原址上沉重的追忆仪式也呈现了另一种方式的考证。

影片下半段渐渐转向幸存者更加个人化的叙述，体现了镜头其对受访者情绪的敏锐捕捉。影像依旧集中在老人们的家中，但是受访者在其真实生活环境里的

王兵与受访者祁录基合影，2016，王兵工作室惠允。

吸烟，他走去取来当年带在身上的《圣经》，他在陋室擦拭钢琴，他呼应儿女不时的呼唤，她取出逝者的遗书。部分片段短暂地指向了受访者室外的生活场景：他从诊所回家路上必经的闹市，他在江边长椅上休息时看到的对面鳞次栉比的高楼……影片通过这些线索，将历史事件的时空边界向今天，向农场遗址之外喧嚣而平庸的都市场景中延展。自然而然，影片也勾勒出受访者身份的另一面：他是幸存者，也是虔诚的基督信徒，是灾难后自学成材中医师，是潦倒的钢琴家，或是逝者的遗孀和一手把遗孤带大的母亲。这些点滴巧妙地揭开了湮没在历史尘埃里的事件与幸存者当下生活之间的联系。事件对他们生命的影响显然没有终止在1961年这个时间点上，而是成为长久存储于他们体内的记忆。记忆会在每天的日常情景里瞬间或持久复现，正如镜头下他的酒瘾，他/她在受访过程试图压抑又禁不住爆发的无奈与悲伤。

《死灵魂》里记录的信息并不能为还原一个所谓客观真实的历史事件提供依据，影片毫不避讳幸免者对事件起因各有参差的阐释，对数字与日期模棱两可的回溯。换言之，影片忽视甚至无视了一种客观的、绝对的、封闭性的真实性。它所呈现的，是受访者对自己屈辱经历的直接陈述，对偷、藏、抢这些过往行为的坦率承认，以及在镜头前对悲伤情绪的自发宣泄。这种情景真实的表达背后的记录方法值得探究。毫无疑问，王兵及其团队长达13年的拍摄，对亲历者一次又一次的接近过程，对120多个个体长达600多小时的访谈记录，都为影片构建这样的真实提供了基本的可能性。但受访者在镜头前的自如绝非任何一个冷眼旁观的姿态可以捕捉，镜头背后，导演本人的观察与提问既是沉浸式的，又是冷静的。之所以能这样，再往前追究，王兵说过：“我小时候在工厂工作，单位里就有这样一个人，别人都觉得他很怪离他很远，但是我离他很近，我懂他”。也许，正是感同身受的经历让他获得了把握人与人之间交流的边界，接近真实的记录与表达的秘诀。

展评 | 王兵

文/郭锦泓

2017.12.26

ARTFORUM
艺术论坛

王兵，《15小时》，2017，数字高清录像，彩色有声，两部分，各7小时55分钟。

王兵的作品中有非常强烈的“在地感”，这种原始而粗粝的记录表达形式，使他的作品几乎成了当代中国影像创作中的某种“异端”。而这种异端感，又因其拍摄对象可以是十三亿人民中的任何一个，让人感到一种难以言说的矛盾。拍摄手法和拍摄对象之间的这一矛盾准确地指向了我们这个时代令人无法直视的真相：沉默镜头下持续五分钟的濒死面庞，强迫观众面对一种不得不共情的残酷，一种与主流价值观背道而驰、却无限接近现实的残酷。

毫无疑问，正是基于上述“在地感”，王兵的作品往往需要观众百分之百地沉浸于影像现场，由是，将他带入“白盒子”式的画廊空间并非易事。所幸此次魔金石个展的主展厅被改造成了一座微型影院：黑帘之外，黑白影像《遗址》（2014）通过冷静的镜头记录了埋葬于戈壁滩六十年的遗骸，古拉格群岛式的毫无保留带给我们时间的荒蛮；黑帘之内，《15小时》（2017）不加任何修饰和叙事地记录了浙江省织里镇上一家纺织工厂工人的日常生活细节；而《方绣英》（2017）则因涉及生死，自然产生了无可避免的叙事性——双影像彼此呼应，构筑出一幅“贫乏”众生图。如《方绣英》中，王兵以几乎不带任何人类感情的镜头语言捕捉到了家庭成员刻意消解“死亡”过程中产生的一个个充满戏谑感的瞬间——这是被拍摄对象所刻意遗忘的血痕和囊肿。在《15小时》里，静止的镜头对准由早至晚的厂房车间，和工人们重复的劳作，这可预知的、无法被人力所终结的时间超过了“安全”范围，也成就了王兵一笔一划刻下的众生之歌。

在时间之海中被已逝的生命之浪淹没，再借由日常重复的生命奋力游回岸边，荒草和白沙下，我们回到祖先的骸骨之中，都是些没名没姓的残破歌谣，令我们耳聋目盲。从主展厅的密闭空间出来，再看到投射于外展厅地面的《遗址》片段，及其被数码打印陈列于墙上的影像静帧，我们仿佛是跟随不知名者的足迹再度返回戈壁，而这段旅程中被唤起的情绪无关于浪漫主义的感伤和怀旧，甚至截然相反——如同《夜与雾》（阿伦·雷乃，1956）中从一去不复返的犹太人手上褪下的堆积如山的婚戒，这一刻，从无限接近濒死的体验中迈步而出的我们，与先于我们而生的“伤口”（德勒兹，《pure immanence》,p27）融为一体。

《西铁区》：历史与阶级意识

文/吕新雨

2003.10

“我们想创造一个世界，但最终这个世界崩溃了。”

——纪录片《铁西区》导演王兵

看过纪录片《铁西区》的人都会对那一开始的运动长镜头印象深刻。随着火车缓缓进入，视野中展开的是一片白雪覆盖的荒芜的厂房，在冥暗的灰色天空下，一些活动的身影如同幽灵，仿佛我们进入到了另一个世界，一个业已毁灭的世界：工业文明的废墟。长达三分钟的长镜头以一种仪式般的方式赋予我们一种进入，对历史的进入。

铁西区位于辽宁省沈阳市，是中国历史最长、规模最大的机械加工业基地和基建配套工业基地,其主体是国有企业，也是社会主义计划经济在今天的最后堡垒。铁西区的历史可以追溯到1934年日本侵华期间，它为日军生产武器装备及为大型军工企业提供机械配套设备，南宅北厂的格局就是在日本人期间形成的，2003年拆迁的很多工人的住宅还是在原日本人住房的基础上改建的。新中国建立以后，苏联将二战期间从德国拆除的设备整修后，作为著名的156项投资项目援华，其中大部分安装在这里，因为有靠近苏联的地缘条件和日本人建立的工业基础，所以它也成为计划经济管理体制实施最早和苏联模式实施最彻底的地区，今天辽宁的国有资产比重仍达75%。在改革开放之前，东北的工业一直是中国工业的脊梁，是社会主义现代化的发动机，直到八十年代初，在铁西区一带工厂就业的工人数量依然达到顶峰，约有100万左右。改革开放以后，中国现代化的发展路径从依赖计划经济转向依赖市场经济，整个国家改革开放的战略历史是：八十年代重点发展珠江三角洲，九十年代重点发展上海浦东。当中国的南方已经进入市场经济时代，东北还处于指令性计划时代，钢材、机械产品高比例平价调出，而财政高额上交，——不是三十年而是五十年的共和国的计划经济在为二十年的市场经济承担成本和代价。正是在九十年代初期，铁西区部分国营企业开始出现亏损 ，到1999年末大部分工厂陆续停产。2002年中共十六大开始重视东北老工业区的振兴，希望通过推进市场化改制，使东北的国有企业实现技术密集与资本密集的现代企业制度的转型。但是资本密集型的重工业发展所需要的资本，中央政府却不再或无力承担，这意味着国家把这种“振兴”其实建立在对外资的期望和依赖上。在这个国家决策的背后是中国目前总体工业装备已经形成进口依赖，社会固定设备投资的三分之二已经依赖进口，东北的石油、煤等矿物资源严重枯竭，仅辽宁的失业工人就已经达到了250万，工潮此起彼伏。就业成为这个社会市场经济体制转换中最痛的问题，它关联着中国现代化过程中的工人阶级及其命运。

当王兵单枪匹马用一台小的DV摄影机进入铁西区的时候，正是1999年末。他拍摄的最重要的一个工厂是沈阳冶炼厂，它建于1934年伪满时期，到今天依然是铁西区最有名的工厂。它有三个很高的烟囱，一个是日本人建的，另两个是在六十年代计划经济发展到巅峰的时候兴建的，在王兵看来，这三个烟囱的历史和形象代表着这个区，也代表着沈阳，是东北工业的一个象征。还有两个重点拍摄的工厂是沈阳轧钢厂和电缆厂。电缆厂生产的输变电系统是中国解放以后独有的，在八十年代之前，沈阳电缆厂是中国重要的输变电系统工厂。而沈阳轧钢厂和当时的铁西区的一些工厂一样在等待破产，其实已经处于被废弃的状态。王兵拍摄的时候冶炼厂的生产还很正常，1999年春节过后破败的迹象才显露出来，但当时谁也不知道冶炼厂会不会倒闭，后来这个工厂终于倒闭了，王兵正好拍了下这个历程。有一次拍到一个车间要停产，一位工人躺在凳子上谈他个人的经历，从上小学开始一直到上山下乡，他在讲述自己生命的过程，他和社会的关系，他怎么理解自己。但是他没有意识到，仅仅是十分钟之后，他命运的改变就开始了，一个人走了进来告诉他工厂停产了。王兵觉得他拍摄到的那个时刻特别重要，拍摄的时候它是未知的，摄影机和这位工人共同度过了那一刻，王兵对它记忆深刻。因为摄影机的见证，这个时刻在时空中凝固，不再消逝。

六十年代后期出生的导演王兵对《铁西区》的解释是：

“我们想创造一个世界，但最终这个世界崩溃了。我拍的是一个主流人群的生活，他们和社会的关系，他们自己生命的印迹。如果把过去几十年的东西拿过来和我的片子放在一起看，你就会看到这几十年这个国家的人在做什么事情，就会看到那个时代人的理想是什么，最后他们的理想实现了没有。这是一个特别重要的问题，同时也可以界定出以后我们应该怎么活。”

这里的“主流人群”就是中国的工人阶级。第三世界社会主义国家的工人阶级及其历史不同于发达资本主义国家的工人阶级及其历史，这个不同正是我们需要给予阐释的。第三世界的社会主义革命和现代化的实践到底意味着什么？这已经是无法回避的迫切问题，它将界定出我们的自我理解，但这个自我理解的过程却将注定在各种不同力量的争斗中艰难展开。这是纪录片《铁西区》让我们看到的最重要的意义。

原文链接：http://sh.sina.com.cn/20070615/120777741.shtml

LEAP精选 | 王兵: 隐形的中国独立纪录片及其镜头下的隐形主角

文/让-米歇尔·傅东（Jean-Michel Frodon）
2015

艺术界
LEAP

王兵，《铁西区》静帧截图，2003年

中国纪录片导演王兵于4月6日在阿姆斯特丹被授予2017年“EYE ART&FILM”奖，主办方称“王兵因其融合了电影与视觉艺术两界的创作”而获此殊荣。该奖项前两届的得主分别为黑特·史德耶尔(Hito Steyerl，2015年) 和本·里弗斯（Ben Rivers，2016年）。

天黑了，天又亮了。火车穿过城市，像嘉年华里的“幽灵列车”。但如幽灵一般的并非火车，而是城市本身，这是一个巨大而荒芜的世界。在沈阳——中国东北地区辽宁省的首府，大型钢铁厂纷纷关闭，它们曾经是中国工业化进程中跳动的心脏 ，如今却不会再开启。这里仿佛静卧着一场未来主义的钢铁梦，它曾是机器的世界，是运转这些机器并以此为生、被称为新世界主人的工人们的大都会。但这里的未来从此将被遗忘。工厂停工了，机器沉默了，铁锈在生长。在这片巨大的失去活力的铁西区，还留守着一些居民，但他们不再是未来的建造者，而成为惨淡度日的幽魂，只有寒冷、酒精和记忆为伴。

滔滔长河般的大型纪录片《铁西区》（2003）用时9小时、跨越三部篇章，勾勒了那些曾见证中国工业腾飞的群体的肖像和坟墓。他们是重工业工人、无产阶级。在半个世纪的时间里，以他们的名义，中国这个世界上人口最多的国家进行了一场轰轰烈烈而突如其来的变革。当时，中国正在迈入21世纪，一心想要成为世界第一大强国。成千上百万的人们曾是这场变革的推动者，现在却成为这个随千禧年画上句号的时代的遗魂。

然而在近三年的时间里，一位年轻人独自背着一架小型摄像机，走过了铁西区的大街小巷、工厂车间，造访了那些房屋住宅。由此诞生了一部史无前例的电影，它既是目前正在实现的未来——我们的未来——的见证，也是一个曾被许诺、却再也不会到来的未来的见证。

《采油日记》，2008年

这位年轻人名叫王兵，2000年他三十三岁。《铁西区》面世后，王兵立刻被奉为当代电影的重要人物——无论是在欧洲、日本还是美国。但在中国的情况却恰恰相反，如果不是国外的认可让这部作品得以“荣归故里”，它将彻底在中国隐形。其实作品的回归也是幽灵式的，因为《铁西区》的影碟全部来自盗版。在中国，没有官方出版发行许可的电影都以盗版形式存在。王兵，作为将镜头对准中国经济变迁之下边缘人群的卓越拍摄者，他本人也近乎隐形，——至少在当他作为一名导演出现在自己国家的时候。

自《铁西区》面世以来，王兵所有的电影作品都在关注那些失去了“可见权”（正如所谓的“公民权”）的社会群体。在中国社会希望为自己树立的形象中，这些人是没有“户口”可言的。尤其是那些中央政权乐于见其被永远掩埋掉的历史——比如“大跃进”的见证人，以及他们关于“大跃进”的记忆：这场以实现现代化为目标的运动造成了惨烈的人道与经济灾难，令数千万人成为饥荒与镇压的牺牲品。《和凤鸣》（2007）是一部感人肺腑的作品，它长时间地

键入文本的回忆。这部电影真正将已逝的生命与史实带回镜头前；与王兵三年后拍摄的同一题材的故事片《夹边沟》相比，它的“在场”性更具震撼力。

在其余的大部分作品中，王兵以纪录片的形式追踪了好几类社会边缘人、或存在于社会可见度之外的人们的日常生活。《疯爱》（2013）记叙了被拘禁在一所精神病院里的病人的生活。虽然影片中一些导演常用的长镜头依然充满了强烈的感染力，但从选题角度而言，它可能是王兵最不那么富有重大意义的一部电影。因为此般精神疾病其实是一种特殊现象，影片中很多情景在世界其他许多地区也会有类似的发生。

尽管各个文化看待和对待“疯人”的方式不尽相同，可惜“疯人”成为被社会抹杀的形象这种情况本身就是一个相当普遍的现象，福柯在很久以前就已经就此作出论述。相比之下，王兵的另外三部代表作更富有时代意义：以石油工人为题材、长篇史诗型的《采油日记》（2008，840分钟）；描述运煤司机一路送货和讨价还价的《煤钱》（2009）；围绕三个无依无靠、自力更生的小姑娘，表现中国西南贫困山区生活的《三姊妹》（2012）。

《无名者》（2009）追踪了一个远离社会、一言不发的人物，他的生活以一种绝对的、充满诗意而极其现实的形态，体现了在我们世界的内部一个“另类世界”的真实存在。然而，这个另类世界往往在一系列社会运作程序下被遮蔽了，包括新闻审查、媒体和社会多数群体对此的故意忽视等。其实不可见的群体也是人们不想见到的群体，而不仅仅因为他们自己躲藏起来，或被政权、机构所遮蔽。

对于他作为电影人的选择，王兵仅仅回答“我到一些平凡的地方拍摄一些平凡的人。”他将电影创作的程度降到最低，而实际上这项工作恰恰是对于一种可见性的建构（纪录片和故事片同样需要创作，即使比重和方式不同）。我们很久以来就知道，要让被拍摄和呈现的人与事物变得可见，靠单纯的拍摄和展示是不够的。正好相反，通常图像的累积会让它的内容变得更加隐形，从而被掩盖或淹没在模式化解读和混淆的概念中。王兵所有的电影作品都在耐心地培养感觉和情感氛围，让一些人、地点和境况自己浮现出来。
他的很多电影片时很长，并大量使用长镜头，这是令表现对象变得可见的条件。很明显，数码相机带来的可能性（轻便、低成本、特别是长时间拍摄的可能）帮助王兵创造了他自己的电影风格。同时，以更直觉、更不可计量的方式，王兵的电影可以用一种独特的距离感（特别是对于面孔和身体）和运动感来定义。在他对摄影机的运用中包含着一种舞蹈性，即摄影机的运动伴随着被拍摄者在空间中的活动，产生出意义和美感。只要摄影机一开始运转，无论是在铁西区积雪的小巷里、在工厂车间或洗澡间里、继而转到火车上，观众就可以感受到这种艺术：它知道如何利用偶然事件、冲突和突然改变摄影角度来传递信息；它创造出一种流动性，将极端现实主义（而非超级现实主义）与幻想之物结合在一起。

但我们又不能将王兵的这种拍摄简单概括为一种取景操作。《和凤鸣》以跟随老妇人回家的运动镜头开篇，这里王兵将他富有意味地观察人物的方式发挥到极致。乔治·迪迪-于贝尔曼（Georges Didi-Huberman）很好地理解了王兵在这里塑造的丰富的造型感、伦理性与政治含义，以及他非同寻常的立场，即“跟随”被拍摄者：“摄像机跟随被拍摄者，即使长时间无法捕捉到对方的脸、他的正面、也要这样做。这是拒绝预先采取行动，或进行任何指挥。它不‘获取’也不‘捕捉’：它只是简单地‘跟随’。这可能在告诉我们，如果没有陪伴、没有对人身的尊重——哪怕只是留在后面、隐秘地跟随——我们永远无法理解他者身体的每个动作及其特定的时间性（‘我跟随你’，此处意思是‘我理解你的想法思路’）。”在这里，跟随人物的背影时，“可见性”变得更加令人不安、更加深刻。

然而，摄影机并非始终需要运动。它以一种极其准确到位的处理方式跟随和凤鸣从楼下返回家中，由此建立起影片人物之间的关系与叙事的活力。这种艺术手法看似非常简单却十分强大。电影随后进入极长的静止画面，老人讲述她所经历的可怕历史，而天色逐渐暗了下来。一个恐怖而痛苦的世界、也是自尊和情感的世界，在逐渐加强的昏暗中浮现出来。另外的形象，在背影镜头之后，通过某种似乎应该隐藏的渠道完成了它的显现。直到一个特定的时刻，和凤鸣通过插科打诨的方式很“单纯”地让王兵开灯，因为“什么都看不见了”。这一刻电影语言的强大力量达到了巅峰，而它的实现方式却是最为极少主义的。

王兵不仅让我们终于见到了他拍摄的对象，也见到了主人公讲述的那些消失在集体历史中、被流放到戈壁滩深处的人们——他们注定在那里死去，并从记忆中被抹杀，即使作为死者也不可存在。王兵擅长让

那些被社会和媒体图像摒弃的人重新被推至前台，也因此在他自己的国家里特别受忽略，而那里本是最需要、也最应该认可他的电影艺术的地方。

作为个案的王兵作品的典型性一方面来自于其作品的巨大能量，另一方面则是因为能够获得另一种认同与可见度：通过国际电影节、国际评论和海外发行进行放映。王兵的天才证明了他理所应当从中受益，而那些没有获得如此巨大成功的中国艺术家们同样值得赞誉。

这些导演属于一个年代已经不短的传统：他们在90年代初出道，被称为第六代导演。此前的一代导演来自80年代初北京电影学院文革后的首届毕业生，是他们令被文革摧毁的中华人民共和国电影获得再生。陈凯歌、张艺谋、田壮壮及其同僚们受传统绘画、传统戏剧形式和农村风景（这些人在70年代曾被送去上山下乡）的启发，即使在描绘和批判当下社会现实的时候，他们的作品画面也在追求传统的美感。相反，自1990年起，新一代城市电影导演决意要公开表现日常现实中最阴暗的一面。他们的作品不追求漂亮画面、甚至刻意使用脏画面，同时具有很强的纪实性。其中有纯粹纪录片形式的，如吴文光的《漂流北京》（1990）是奠基作；或在虚构故事中穿插纪录片影像，如张元的早期电影《妈妈》（1992）和《北京杂种》（1993）。而通过作品《找乐》（1993）、《民警故事》（1995）和《希望之旅》（2002），宁瀛将这种电影精神推向了巅峰。二十五年来，中国纪录片不断挖掘社会阴暗面、并探索新的表现手法，其中一些优秀作品在国际电影节中获奖，包括刘佳茵的《牛皮》（2005）和《牛皮2》（2009）、赵亮的《上访》（2009）等。另一些导演如王超、王小帅、李阳、唐晓白、刁亦男、文晏、宋芳，他们的故事片包含纪录片元素，也有助于深刻揭露诸多社会尖锐问题。

这类电影记录了随着中国迅猛发展而产生的各种问题和悲剧，涉及的领域包括环境、健康、照顾病人和老人问题、倍受剥削的工人的命运、为致富财迷心窍的后果、或性取向中的少数群体，这些电影通常也是隐形的。

如果说王兵无可非议地成为他的时代中最重要的纪录片导演，我们不会忘记另一位中国电影人，他将故事与记录的边界混淆，在十五年来倾尽全力表现他的国家的巨变，这就是贾樟柯。隐形社会群体也是其许多作品里的关键点与原动力，包括反映三峡大坝建设影响的《三峡好人》（2006），讲述一段工业历史的消亡、同时将社会不同层面联系到一起的《二十四城记》（2008），记录上海不为人知的历史的《海上传奇》（2010）。贾樟柯最具代表性的作品可能是一部简单的纪录片，以时尚界为背景的《无用》（2007）。它用电影手法将一位著名设计师、生产服装的血汗工厂和贫困乡村联系起来。在乡村里，农民和手工艺者始终处于急速的现代化发展的边缘，他们被经济进步远远地甩在了后面，但也拥有另一种与世界的关系。贾樟柯艺术的伟大之处在于没有将他们与中国发展最活跃、最光荣和惊人巨变的那一部分相对立，而是非常自然地将二者置入同一幅大画卷中。同样，与他的众多同僚相反，贾樟柯从未放弃将自己置于中国人眼中的中国电影“大舞台”上。《无用》中有一个情景：镜头从国际知名服装设计师转向她在路上偶然遇到的一位山西手工艺者，后者沿着一条土路独自走去。这个片段是贾樟柯作为艺术家、思想家和社会公民的神来之笔：它的情节没有任何天真或自满的色彩，而重构了一个复杂的世界——一个充斥着巨大矛盾的整体。

翻译 | 赵玉

影片也取材于杨显惠的著作《夹边沟记事》，法文译本为《Le Chant des martyrs : dans les camps de la Chine de Mao》，Balland出版社，2010。

引自王兵与伊莎贝拉· 安森姆的对话，出处：《王兵：一个中国导演》，普罗旺斯大学出版社，2014年。但王兵在其他访谈中也曾数次说过类似的话。

译注：法文“我跟随你”一语的第二义即“我理解你的想法思路”。

出自迪迪-于贝尔曼所撰写的《L’Œil de l’Histoire 4》一书所收录的《Peuples exposés, peuples figurants》（午夜出版社），作者是在评论《无名者》时写下这段话的，但适用于王兵的整体电影创作。

关于作者

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WANG BING

with Zoe Meng Jiang

Film | In Conversation | October 5, 2017

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Winning the Golden Leopard at this year's Locarno Film Festival for his latest film, Mrs. Fang, Wang Bing is the second documentary director in recent years—after Gianfranco Rosi—to earn the top award from a major European art film festival, which historically tends to favor fiction over non-fiction. This perhaps indicates that documentary film is no longer a subgenre of cinema but rather an indispensable site of aesthetic and political intervention in an era when the discussion of truth and realness has become increasingly urgent. Two days before the award was announced, over beers, cigarettes, and a Chinese meal prepared by Tibetans at La Rotonda in Locarno, Wang Bing spoke with me about his influences, the geopolitical and topographical dimensions of his work, and the making of *Mrs. Fang.*

Zoe Meng Jiang (Rail): I have wanted to ask you this question for a long time—how did you manage to capture that phone call at the very end of *He Fengming* (2007)? In the film, after three hours of static shots of Ms. He's oral account of her persecution during the Anti-Rightist Movement of the 1950s, this unexpected phone call reveals that Ms. He is still engaging in activism and connecting with other survivors of the labor camps. This ending seems to symbolically link China's traumatic history to its present. The closure of the film suggests there's not yet a closure to that phase of history.

Wang Bing: I filmed with rapture when that phone call happened. I was so excited. I had borrowed a camera, bought a lens, and driven for a whole day to Lanzhou. I didn't rest and went straight to film *He Fengming*. When the phone call happened, I felt a great relief.

In the early 2000s, I was at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and randomly went to a screening. It was a feature film, recording only an old lady talking, with almost no cuts. I thought the film was genius, though I couldn't understand at all what the old lady was talking about, and didn't know anything about the film. It was not until several years later that I found out it's Jean Eustache's *Numéro Zéro* (1971). Eustache filmed his mother recounting her life story. The film is an exemplification of the merit of zero editing.

Rail: It was an influence on the making of *He Fengming*.

Wang: To some extent, yes. I also used this method of minimal editing in *He Fengming*. It might be easy to film anything with this method, but it's hard to tell whether it can produce a good film.

Rail: Have you experienced failure before? Say you've got lots of raw footage but couldn't use it, or you didn't know how to end a film after a long period of shooting.

Wang: Never. There was never one project that I failed to finish. Only once maybe. But it was not because of me. After shooting *Three Sisters* (2012), I was very interested in a village near where the three sisters lived. I got sick at the time, so I hired a few cinematographers to shoot some footage in the village while I recovered from my illness. They went on filming for a few months, but the footage they got was not so good, and I couldn't use it. But every project I started myself, I finished. I always plan ahead and estimate how much time I would need.

Rail: You've been to both art school and film school—after finishing your study at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, you went to Beijing Film Academy. What prompted your decision to go to film school? And what was it like being at Beijing Film Academy in the 1990s?

Wang: I was really into cinema. In my undergraduate years, I watched three films almost every day. I'm

from the same generation as the Sixth Generation filmmakers like Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke, but I went to Beijing Film Academy after them, and took on a completely different trajectory. I had the chance to study with Zhou Chuanji (1925 – 2017) in Beijing. He was an excellent professor. During the Cultural Revolution, he secretly translated all the major Western film theories into Chinese. He traveled around the world in the 1980s and brought back thousands of video cassettes. In his classes I watched the films of Tarkovsky, Antonioni, and Bergman. It was Tarkovsky's films that made me understand what cinema really is. But the influence of Bergman didn't last very long. I also loved Pasolini. I think all filmmakers in our time owe something to Pasolini.

Rail: The way I understand your practice is, the choice of location is an important or even fundamental part of your artistic decision-making. It seems that your filmmaking can be divided into three phases: *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002), *He Fengming* and *The Ditch* (2010) were from places you've lived in and are familiar with—Shenyang, where you studied, and Northwestern China, where you grew up; then you moved on to Yunnan Province in Southwestern China, where you made *Three Sisters* (2012), *'Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013), *Father and Son* (2014), and others. I read that you encountered the three sisters on your way to visit the mother of your deceased friend, the writer Sun Shixiang, who is from rural Yunnan and died in 2001 at the tragically young age of 32. It was because of this that I got to know about Sun's autobiographical novel, *Shenshi* (*History of the Gods*), an epic about rural life in China.

Wang: Yes. It is a tremendously important novel, but it's sadly unknown and neglected.

Rail: And then you followed young people from Yunnan to Eastern China, where they become migrant workers, and where your recent films have been set. Can you talk about your filmmaking practice in relation to these different places? Particularly Yunnan, where you spent your most prolific years.

Wang: For me, different places mean different cinematic spaces, and my approach to the narrative and shooting plan would change accordingly. Northeastern Chinese people are portrayed the way they are in *Tie Xi Qu*. And to depict Northwestern China, I chose prison as my subject. Because for thousands of years of Chinese history, the Northwest has been the place where many individuals were imprisoned or exiled. You can still find traces of their existence there. Prisons can tell us a lot, about politics in the past and politics in the present. I grew up in the Northwest and I know what the truth of living there is. That's why I didn't look at the Northwest in the exotic way that Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige did in their film *Yellow Earth* (1984).

To digress a little, Chinese cinema in the past is mostly an institutional cinema. The films are more like propaganda than cinema. Films like *Yellow Earth* are but extensions or variations of institutional cinema, not real cinematic interventions. To some extent they are similar to Xie Jin's films, or not even as good as Xie Jin.[1] What are the real feelings of the people who dwell on this land? They are not concerned with this question. When representing people in films, we must be very conscious about any given ideological position.

The Northwest is the Gobi Desert, the Huangtu Plateau. In such landscapes, people live a bold, rough, and strong existence. It's not that different in Yunnan. Though Yunnan features green mountains and blue waters, people there are still tough, tenacious, or even intrepid, in a very external way. Their strength is no less than those from the Northwest. Yunnan is at the upper part of the Yangtze River, which could be the reason why there is something primitive in Yunnan people. I always fantasized about the Yangtze River area. The Yellow River and the Yangtze River regions are the two cradles of Chinese civilization. They cultivate two different ways of life. I grew up in the Yellow River region, so the

other region was very mysterious to me. I wanted to live and understand the Yangtze River culture and put it in my film. Therefore, after finishing working in the Northwest, I went right to Yunnan.

Rail: The American anthropologist James C. Scott has famously defined people living in Zomia Highlands as "barbaric by design"—that Zomia's ethnic groups are formed by people who run away from various forms of state governance. Zomia consists of parts of seven Asian countries, including Yunnan and Myanmar.[2] I was thinking, after you documented the Ta'ang people crossing the border between Myanmar and Yunnan to seek refuge in *Ta'ang* (2016), a map of Zomia sort of emerges from your filmography.

Wang: I know Scott's book. I haven't read it yet. If there are things in common among the highland ethnic groups, it's because of the harsh cultural and natural circumstances. Yunnan ethnic minorities in past Chinese cinema are always stereotypes of peaceful people who dance and sing a lot.[3] But they are not like that at all! Most Chinese don't know what they are really like. I entered the region and found them extremely respectable. Like the way Sun Shixiang depicted in his novel, they live in a brutal environment. They are so full of hope and dreams. They strive to change their lives, but reality is hard to change.

Yunnan's terrain is magnificent, even more so than the Huangtu Plateau. Valleys connecting giant mountains can go one or two thousand meters deep. A local song says: "There are green mountains after eight hundred green mountains." And then on the other side you have the Tibetan Plateau, the highest and largest plateau in the world. Such an environment determines the local people's emotional lives. They are strong and fierce.

Relationships among people can be so direct that it would seem ferocious to us. In the past, we didn't know that they are like this. The Northeastern Yunnan, where I made most of my films, has produced many heroic figures in Chinese history.

I'm also fascinated by the lower part of Yangtze River, the region of Shanghai, and Zhejiang Province, where modern Chinese culture originated and traditional Chinese culture is best preserved. I made my three most recent films there, also hoping to enter the cultural lives of Eastern China.

Rail: Could you briefly introduce *Mrs. Fang*?

Wang: *Mrs. Fang* was commissioned by documenta 14, conceived as a video art piece. Soon it was also invited by the Locarno Film Festival. Fang Xiuying is the mother of a good friend of mine. I was going to make a documentary about her in 2015, but it was postponed because I was too busy at the time. In 2016, the friend called to tell me that her mother's illness had grown severe, and she might not live very long. I went to see Fang Xiuying right away. When I got there, I realized it'd be difficult to make a documentary about her. I hesitated, but still decided to film her. We filmed the last eight days of her life. So it's a story about a dying old woman.

Rail: In the first three minutes of *Mrs. Fang*, we see footage of Fang in a relatively functional state. She must have been more or less lucid at the time. I'm wondering, what did she think of being filmed?

Wang: In fact, at the time in 2015, she had already lost the ability to talk. But she still had memories of her children. For example, whenever her daughter came home, she would approach her and hold her hand. I don't think she understood what it is to be filmed. I only filmed her when she was happy and not stressed. So I don't have much footage of her in a functional state, only a few shots. I thought I would have more time later, but life is precarious. Ultimately, the time I got with her was short.

Rail: There are three kinds of shots in *Mrs. Fang*: close-ups of Fang's face; shots of Fang's room in a theatrical setup, with the bed in the foreground, Fang's family members

in the middle ground attending to her, and more people in the background talking or watching TV; and handheld tracking shots of Fang's brother-in-law going electrofishing on the lake. When did you come up with this visual structure—was it during the shooting or the editing?

Wang: The structure was set during the shooting. I mainly used two lenses. One is an 80mm telephoto lens, and the other is a 19mm wide-angle lens. For the indoor scenes, it's better to use static shots with deep focus or in close-up, and for the outdoor scenes I try to balance this with camera movements to make it more dynamic.

Rail: Do you have your customary cameras?

Wang: I always change cameras for different situations. I started making films with a MiniDV, then HDV, and now I'm using a 4K digital video camera. People often talk about cinema in terms of composition, color, lighting, etc. But the image itself is of no avail. Cinema is not about composition nor color, but about balancing power dynamics, about continuous change.

Rail: How do you usually find this balance of power dynamics?

Wang: It's a matter of training. Now within any given situation, I'm able to find the balance in one minute.

Rail: Why would you film the scenes of Fang's brother-in-law going fishing, including the long take at the end, three months after the death of Fang? Is there any symbolic significance to these scenes?

Wang: The region where Fang lives is known as "the fertile land of fish and rice" in China. But you can see that everything looks decrepit now. Older people don't have much to do. To help out with the family expenses, they sometimes go fishing on the lake. One evening when I was filming Fang, her brother-in-law told me he was going fishing. I thought it'd be a chance for me to see how people around Fang live, or exist. So I went with him and filmed the process. The reason those scenes are always at night is because electrofishing is illegal in China. Nowadays fish farming in all rural Chinese rivers and lakes is contracted out. Ordinary people don't have access to fishing anymore. Natural resources in the countryside are depleted, even in China's real "land of fish and rice."

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Mrs. Fang - An Interview with Wang Bing

Four Three Film | October 1, 2017

By Jeremy Elphick | Locarno Film Festival

Wang Bing

With a remarkably steady output of films over the last fifteen years, Wang Bing has become one of documentary cinema's most revered filmmakers. He's never been short of ambition, either; Wang begun his career with the nine-hour documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*. His work has captured exclusion, conflict, and neglect on film, addressing them specifically as symptoms of inequality. His new film *Mrs. Fang* is his second shortest feature – 2009's 53-minute *Coal Money* is the shortest – of his career. Though fans of Wang's longer films should not despair; the director released a second film in 2017: *15 hours*. As it's title suggests, the single-shot documentary, set in a garment processing facility in China is, very much, 15 hours long.

Despite its brevity, *Mrs. Fang* is one of Wang's most tightly-focused works. Set in Zhejiang in Eastern China, the film is focused on the final days in the life of the titular Fang Xiu Ying, who is dying from Alzheimer's. The work plays as an aching character study, underpinned by a practiced, filmic intuition. His invaluable sense for intimacy offers a series of invaluable portraits: the end of a life, the process of accepting death, and the pervasive inequality and societal neglect that created the conditions for an acceleration of corporeal decay in the first place. It's a film underpinned by a profound sense of discomfort: we watch a subject at their most vulnerable and defenceless. *Mrs. Fang* offers austere and lingering insights, but the challenging work they emerge from is built on ethically questionable turf, a context certain to divide even die-hard fans of the director.

We spoke to Wang Bing about *Mrs. Fang* at Locarno Film Festival – shortly before the film premiered at the festival, where it went on to take out the top prize, the Golden Leopard.

I went into *Mrs. Fang* having seen the majority of your work, and it cuts an immediate and obvious contrast to a lot of your earlier works when it comes to duration. I've watched *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* on two occasions. It's a stunning and consuming piece, and the 9-hour duration contributes a huge amount to that experience. Even with recent works like *Ta'ang, Bitter Money* and *'Til Madness Do Us Part,* they're all relatively lengthy works. When it comes to your latest film *Mrs. Fang*, however, it starts and ends with an unfamiliar brevity – not to say that as a negative, but more to point out that I found that conciseness as something that distinguished it from many of your more ambitious outings. Did you have a particular preconception when it came to how long you wanted the work to be?

I started editing of the film, most of it – 60 minutes, 70 minutes – when I was in Beijing. When I moved to Paris for work, I started to finish the last 15 minutes in the second session of the editing. It's not like I decided in advance how long the film would be. It is very much related to the footage. As you know in this footage, there is not much talking from the main characters... exactly. So, it's very much the feeling about the editing being finished as soon as I've told the story. It doesn't depend on me deciding how 'long' the film is going to be, or 'has' to be. It's very much based and related to the footage that I collect.

One of the most recurring pieces of footage throughout *Mrs. Fang* is the close-up of her face, lingering on the nuances of her expressions – or lack thereof. The unobtrusive approach you've taken to documentary has always been a major part of your work. I'm still interested in the process that underpinned *Mrs. Fang*: as a deeply intimate film, with this recurring image of vulnerability taking such a central place in the work.

When I started to shoot *Mrs. Fang*, she was very sick. She was lying in bed and she was not talking. So what I did on the very first day, was to do this shooting for about two hours. Most of this shooting was the close-ups. I wanted to learn about this Mrs. Fang in the condition she was in at the time. After those two hours of shooting, I went back to my place and I watched the footage again and again. I was trying to figure out how I could create a story; what this footage could tell me about Mrs. Fang. When I started to watch the footage, I focused very much on her eyes. I found out that those eyes had a kind of light that told me she was still alive. She was already sick and was unable to speak. I was trying to understand how I was going to keep shooting her. I was thinking the best option would be to shoot the truth through her eyes. Her story. This is why there were so many close-ups.

With her being unable to communicate, how did you approach that sort of a subject? Did you initially get involved through talking to her family, I think it said in the end credits? I wanted to know more about that: how that story developed, with you being brought in and developing a relationship with the family and a subject that is so vulnerable – and how you dealt with that?

I already knew the family because I met Mrs. Fang's daughter sometime before, in 2015. In that period of time I was shooting another documentary – another story – not far from the village where Mrs. Fang lived. When I met the daughter, I was invited to go and visit the family, and see the house. At that time, Mrs. Fang was in good health.

That was the footage at the start of the film, the early footage?

Yes, that was the early footage. At that time, we were just talking, a little bit of talking. Since I was interested in Mrs. Fang, I had this idea, talking to the daughter, saying, 'I would be interested in making a documentary about your mother.' But at that time it was just an idea. So I left, because I had other work to do. After one year had passed – in 2016 – I received a phone call from the family of Mrs. Fang, from

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the daughter, saying, “You know, my mama is getting sick. What do you want to do, do you want to come back?” I decided to go back, but at that time Mrs. Fang was very ill. She was already lying in bed. I had about seven days before she died.

The idea was: we already knew each other, I already knew the family previously, I’d already met Mrs. Fang in another situation. In that year, the idea I had in mind – to make a documentary about Mrs. Fang – never happened, because it was very busy. The time passed by and then I received this phone call from the family and decided to go anyway. There was around seven days of shooting before Mrs. Fang died. Around the fifth day... I mean somebody was dying, it’s not that easy. Being there, shooting. The family accepted the idea because we knew each other already. The neighbour, though, was not that easy. They felt a little bit of pain, so after the fifth day of shooting, I decided to stop for one day. I decided we were not to shoot anything, to let people go back to that environment of sorrows. It’s painful. On the sixth day, I started to shoot again – until the end.

Right. I know you’ve got to run off to introduce the film now, so this is all we’ve got time for. Thanks again for the interview. Hopefully we can have a longer one in the future. Good luck in the competition!

Thank you for the chat.

Interview: Wang Bing

FILM COMMENT

Film Comment | February 22, 2017

By Michael Guarneri and Jin Wang

Throughout his career as an independent filmmaker, Wang Bing (born in 1967) has kept returning to two main themes. On the one hand, the documentaries *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2003), *Crude Oil* (2008), *Coal Money* (2009), *Man With No Name* (2009), *Three Sisters* (2012), *'Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013) and *Father and Sons* (2014) are dedicated to the careful observation of common people's everyday lives, thus bringing to the screen the few joys and many tribulations of factory workers, roughnecks, truck drivers, peasants, and mental patients in present-day China. On the other hand, filmed interview *He Fengming* (2007) and fiction films *Brutality Factory* (2007) and *The Ditch* (2010) constitute a historical investigation into how the Communist Party of China dealt with ideological dissent in the late 1950s, '60s, and '70s.

In the aftermath of Chinese New Year, *Film Comment* took advantage of a break in Stakhanovite director Wang Bing's busy schedule and reached out over Skype to discuss his filmmaking practices, and especially his latest documentaries *Ta'ang* and *Bitter Money*, both of which premiered in festivals in 2016. *Ta'ang* follows various Myanmarese families of Ta'ang ethnicity as war forces them to leave their native villages and flee to China; *Bitter Money* follows young people migrating from Yunnan region to the city of Huzhou, determined to make money by working long hours in sewing workshops. *Bitter Money* screens on February 23 in Film Comment Selects.

How are you?
I am fine, thank you. I have been so busy lately! My schedule has been very hectic for the past two years, so I am having a good rest now, recharging my batteries before starting to work again.

What's your next move?
Traveling, shooting, editing, more traveling, more shooting, more editing.

Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky said it well in a 1922 manifesto: he wrote that "cinema is an athlete," and that the man with the camera must have a lot of energy, because filmmaking is an exhausting enterprise.
Yes, filmmaking can be exhausting. Indeed, I made a rule for myself to only follow one project at a time—I cannot take more. Shooting, postproduction, festivals: the work never ends. I am willing to do anything for my movies, but unfortunately I am not much of an "athlete." Do you remember that scene from my film *'Til Madness Do Us Part*, in which a young patient of the mental hospital starts running down the corridor and the cameraman runs after him? Well, that patient was really nervous and could never sleep, so he used to take a lot of exercise to wear himself down. I shot *'Til Madness Do Us Part* with two cameras—one operated by me and one operated by another cameraman. We tried a fixed-camera setup for the running scene, but I felt that the fixed camera couldn't quite create a connection between the audience and the inner world of this person. I felt that only by running with him we could express his anxiety and restlessness. So I told the other cameraman, who is younger and more energetic than me, to run after the patient... [*Laughter*]

Given the reliance on money investments in production and profit-making through distribution, cinema is not only an athletic feat, but also a business. Do you see yourself as an entrepreneur?
In my view, the film industry is very simple: there are commercial movies and there are personal movies, both based on material foundations. Commercial movies are the driving economic force of the film industry. They require a lot of money to be made and involve a lot of people. Consequently, commercial movies need to follow certain rules other than the director's will. However, in the film industry there is also a space for individualism, that is to say the possibility for making personal movies like the ones I make. These personal movies require less investment and involve less people than commercial ones. I am not saying that one type of movies is better than the other. I am saying that every movie has its value, regardless of the budget.

Over the course of the past 17 years, I have found my place in the film industry. I want to make personal movies, so I work with low budgets. I think that if I make a "big investment" movie, I will have less freedom: I will be tied down by the money and by other conditions. For example, if I made a commercial movie I would have to work with a huge crew, and I don't think that I am prepared for that. I would probably end up spending too much time managing the crew and not enough time on the shooting itself. Digital technology provides a good platform for a person to make his own movie with a minimal crew, and that suits me fine. It is the way I want to work. I totally accept and embrace my status. I don't feel it is "poor filmmaking," in spite of the low budget. I think personal movies deserve their place into the film industry beside the commercial ones.

Your friend and colleague Lav Diaz has described at length how he managed to find some freedom within the limits of low-budget, digital filmmaking. How free do you feel as a filmmaker?
There is no absolute freedom for any filmmaker. There will always be limitations on various levels, according to the particular conditions a director works in: "less money" causes the "less freedom" of "less money," and "more money" causes the "less freedom" of "more money." For certain filmmakers, having little money means having little freedom, for other filmmakers —like myself—having little money means having more freedom, because the low budget makes things simpler and more straightforward. So I would say that a director has first of all to find the suitable conditions to create, to do

what he wants to do. A good director always manages to work around—and sometimes break through—these limitations, and achieve his aims.

You mentioned Lav Diaz. Lav set most of his movies in the ancient forests of the Philippines. His characters live there—his stories take place there. The forest is a natural setting: it is beautiful in itself as a scenery, it is beautifully photographed by Lav, and it also costs very little money to shoot there. So by deciding to shoot in the forest, Lav has found a way to solve narrative, aesthetics, and budget problems, all in one. He made a great use of the means at his disposal—that's what a good director does, in my view. And that's what I am trying to do as well.

Most of my movies are documentaries. I like documentaries because they allow me to get into contact with the real life of the people. Also, the documentary form is the most viable way for me to make movies in China. By following people's everyday life, I don't have to look for actors and direct them, I don't have to ask a lot of people to work together for me, and I don't have to ask permission to anybody. The ways in which the Chinese film industry limits filmmakers become invalid for me, if I shoot inexpensive movies about the real life of the people with a small crew. That's why I keep on making documentaries: I like genuine stories, and I like to feel free.

Could we talk a bit about your cinema from the production side, focusing on your latest two documentaries *Ta'ang* and *Bitter Money*? It would be interesting to hear about the practicalities of your work. How much money did you need for *Ta'ang* and *Bitter Money*?
For *Ta'ang* I needed a few thousand Euros to start shooting, because the movie is set in a faraway region, at the Southern border of China. The cost of the movie is basically the cost of the journey, plus some extra expenses during the shooting, which lasted about one month in total. *Bitter Money* cost much more than *Ta'ang*, mainly because the shooting went on for more than two years, between Yunnan province and the city of Huzhou. As for my crew, it is very light. The maximum number is six or seven people, but this almost never happens. It is normally three of us, and sometimes it is only me. That's all my budget allows. [*Laughter*]

What is your equipment?
For *Ta'ang* and *Bitter Money* I used a very small photo camera [a digital camera that primarily takes photos] that has the video recording option. The brand is Sony, the models are Alpha7s and Alpha7s II. I like them because they have a 35mm full-frame sensor. For these models, I have found matching Leica and Zeiss photographic lenses that allow for autofocus. Autofocus is essential for me, because my crew is so small and the conditions in which I work so ever-changing and unpredictable that I need the machine to take care of the focus by itself. Basically, I chose a small photo camera—the one that granted more flexibility during the shooting and that was easier to control. On it, I mounted very good photographic lenses whose production, unfortunately, ceased some time ago. I think the lenses I currently use are from the late 1970s or early '80s. They are almost 40 years old. I was lucky to find someone selling them for a very very cheap price, as if they were rubbish to get rid of. I spent infinitely less than buying new ones, and they are better than today's movie lenses, in my opinion.

If I had to give an advice to young people who want to make low-budget, personal films, I would say first of all make sure you pick the right equipment. New equipment is expensive and not necessarily better than older technology. Don't dismiss something just because it is from another decade. If possible, familiarize yourself with the various options, and spend time at the "flea market" to find good equipment at low cost. Actually, I am very happy and proud of the equipment choices I made for *Ta'ang*. I think that the people that you see in *Ta'ang* are very beautiful. If instead of the old photographic lenses I had used the new movie lenses, which I consider very roughly made, I

couldn't have achieved such beautiful images of such beautiful people. This is only an example, taken from my personal experience. The point is that a filmmaker has to find smart ways to break through the limitations of the budget and get the right tools to do what he wants to do. This is the first step, I would say.

Once I have the right equipment, I can focus on the relationship with the people to be filmed, on understanding of the value of their existence, on the close observation of their everyday life. Documentary for me is not that you just go to some place and film anything you see. The shooting is the last part of the production, it comes after a lot of observation and thinking. For many years I have been working under the limitations of the budget, trying to find a way to shoot freely and control the production of the whole movie as much as possible. Starting from my very first film *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, I became interested in all different aspects of movie production: the budget, the equipment, the crew, the relationship with the people to be filmed... I subsequently found my personal style struggling against limitations and working around problems.

What about postproduction? Is it more expensive than shooting?
It depends case by case. Postproduction didn't cost much for *Ta'ang* because the shooting only lasted one month, due to budget restrictions and other things. We didn't have much material to process. However, for *Bitter Money* I shot more than 2000 hours. The film *Bitter Money* is only a tiny fraction of the whole shooting, about 200 hours. A seven- or eight-month work on post-production awaits me to process the whole footage. I plan to make other movies out these 2000+ hours in the future. I want to tell other stories, go more in depth, add more information.

We understand that you are a very concrete person and you don't like theory very much, but there is another intellectual active in Soviet Russia that we would like to mention here, in relation to your filmmaking practice. It is Dziga Vertov, according to whom cinema must not strive to be Art, but it must try hard to provide information. What is your opinion about that?
Everyone has their own view about cinema, about its nature and function. Our perception of cinema depends on personal sensibility, and it varies a lot according to cultural differences. In my opinion, cinema is very different from painting and sculpture. Cinema is more like language, for me. You can use language to do all sorts of things. You can use it to write poems or you can use it to write an official document, a report. Film is just a tool, a platform that takes you wherever you want to go. There are no fixed rules or policies about what you should or should not do with cinema. So I always try to keep an open mind: for me, the film image is a recording of the reality of human existence in a given historical, socio-economic and political context, but at the same time it contains emotions, beauty, something more abstract that is perhaps Art. Why limit cinema to only one thing?

Bitter Money

Talking about being open to all possibilities, there is this scene in *Bitter Money* where a young woman named Ling Ling turns to you, looks into the camera and says: "Come on, let's go to my sister's. Follow me!" Usually it is the director who tells people what to do, but in your film you are the one who is told what to do…

I am glad that I had this chance to interact with Ling Ling. When I first met her and got to know her, I realized that there is a big anxiety in her life: she doesn't want to work in the sewing workshops, but sewing is the only trade she knows. As shown in the film, she also has problems with her husband. However, there are no real issues between Ling Ling and her husband, there are no major sentimental problems. It is just this anxiety that exists in the air between them and poisons their life. In general, as a director, I want to just disappear and simply record what's happening in front of me. Yet, as I often am the cameraman as well, the interaction with the person I am filming gives me the opportunity to really get into people's life and capture the truth of their existence. It's rare to have chances like this, but it suddenly and unexpectedly happened with Ling Ling. I am so glad.

Are you also a character in your films? Sometimes we see your shadow on the wall or on the ground, we hear you breathing on the soundtrack…

I don't care much about my presence within my movies. As a documentary cameraman, there will always be the chance, or risk, for my shadow to appear in the frame, because I cannot control the light. I cannot really help when this happens, so I don't mind much. In the end, it is only natural: because of the way I work, sometimes you see me, sometimes you hear me coughing...
Personally, I don't want to be in the forefront. I am a quiet person, I don't like to show off, both in real life and during the shooting. So I try to be as discreet a presence as possible, stay with the people quietly, and pay attention to what happens in front of me.

Your film *Ta'ang* opens with a scene in which the war refugees' shelter collapses. The Ta'ang people left their home in Myanmar and now their temporary house at the Chinese border falls down. It is a very concise, powerful opening for your film. How did you get into contact with these refugees in the first place?

The refugees belong to the Ta'ang ethnic group and to other ethnicities. They speak their own language, which I cannot understand. However, since they come from an area at the border between many states, they can speak different languages. The fluency depends case by case, but most people know a little bit of Chinese. So when I visited the Southern border [between China and Myanmar] for the first time, I met several Ta'ang women and their children. I immediately had the feeling that they were very pure, very simple human beings. I like this kind of people, I find them very interesting. So I decided to follow them and I started shooting. Since at the Southern border there is a war and everybody is anxious and panicked, I thought that the audience could be engaged by the quiet observation of this chaotic situation. My aim was not to make a film about the bigger picture, the armed conflict and its political causes, but to record the stories of the displaced mothers and children wandering around, lost. I thought that these stories that I found so interesting could also be attractive to audiences who have never been there, who have never experienced this kind of situation.

I shot the daily life of the Ta'ang people at the border for a short period, then I had to leave. I came back a second time because I wanted to shoot more material, but the women and children I knew were gone, the contact was lost. So I went to another place and met another group of refugees, whom I followed for another short period. As always, for *Ta'ang* my hope and my work was to find the feelings from the people themselves, and translate their personalities, their experience, their lives into the movie.

"We must stay together, we must not separate" is a phrase that we hear several times in *Ta'ang*. We noticed that

the topic of broken families recurs in all your films…
Broken families are one of the many issues that people have to face over the course of their existence. In *Ta'ang* the cause of all troubles is war: refugees are constantly hiding, running around from one place to another. They are lost, they are scared. This precarious situation makes a person become vulnerable, anxious. In *Bitter Money* it is the struggle to make a living that triggers people's anxiety: the workers have to leave their village and their families behind, move to another region, slave away in the city in order to make money. I want to observe people's life, to access their inner world and show what worries them. Everybody lives in worry. If you don't interact with other people, you will never understand their inner world and the issues they have to face every single day of their life. But when you do interact, as a filmmaker or as a spectator, then you are forced to face other people's anxieties and unstable status, and your own anxieties and unstable status, too. We all try to find something of ourselves in the life of other people.

To get the money to pay for transport, food, and other basic needs, the Ta'ang refugees—both adults and children—work in sugar cane plantations in exchange for a ridiculous salary. Do they get paid less than legal workers?
They are paid less than legal workers, of course. It's essential for the refugees to find a job in order to survive while they are so far away from home. The refugees are so desperate that they are willing to accept any job, any salary, any condition. This situation is not at all special, it is the same all over the world. Each person has his position in the economic chain. Nobody wants to be at the bottom. Each person thinks of his own benefit, taking advantage of other people. This is clearly shown in *Ta'ang*. However, *Ta'ang* also shows that when people are in trouble they stick together and help each other, no matter which ethnic group or country they are from. The kindness of humanity still shows sometimes, together with the greedy side.

At some point in the middle of the movie, night falls and it seems like it's never going to end. Watching the film, it's unnerving, it's exhausting, it's scary…
One very practical reason for the long night scenes is related to some limitations we had to face during the shooting. In the daytime we didn't have so much freedom to shoot, for a variety of disturbing reasons. So we shot a lot of material at nighttime, when the situation around us was quieter. Also, at nighttime human beings tend to show and share more of their true feelings and ideas about their status and the world they live in. At nighttime people feel free to speak their mind about a lot of things. During the daytime, on the contrary, they are busy with daily life and work, and it is really hard to get to know a person, because of this façade that we all have to maintain to go through the motions of our daily routine. Therefore, when I was editing *Ta'ang*, I decided to include more than 50 minutes of material from the nighttime footage, to engage audiences with the inner world of the refugees, to provide a more complete account of their life.

During this eternal night a group of women and a few men gather around the fire and start talking about their refugee life, their misery, their families broken by the war, wondering about the future. Being together and talking with each other helps them a little, gives them a chance to get things off their chest. Is your camera like a fire into the night, which people can use to gather around and discuss their problems?
I think that you are reading too much into the movie. There are no metaphors for me. Things are far simpler. The Ta'ang people come from a rural area in which it is very common to gather around the fire and talk. In their native region, nights are not so cold, the weather is a lot warmer than in Northern China. Ta'ang people's life is very different from our city life: at night, they usually gather around the fire and talk for hours. The night scenes in my movie show this habit they have and how they cling to it. I guess it is an attempt by the refugees to live normally, as if they were in their beloved village back home.

***Ta'ang* takes us from Myanmar to China's Southern region Yunnan to follow the refugees,**

while *Bitter Money* takes us from the Yunnan countryside to the city of Huzhou to follow young peasants dreaming of becoming rich quickly by working in sewing workshops. In the China of today everybody dreams of becoming rich, while originally the dream was to create a society in which everybody was equal…
Historically, Chinese society comes from feudalism. We had feudalism for thousands of years. And then, suddenly, China changed into a modern society. At the beginning it was all about ideology, Communist ideology. It is a long story. The People's Republic of China was born as a socialist system: we had a planned economy, in which certain goods were produced in certain quantities, and wealth was subsequently distributed to the people. Under these circumstances, the Chinese market was limited. An individual's productive behavior was limited and everybody got more or less the same amount of wealth. Accordingly, people had very limited possibilities for leaving their native place and moving elsewhere to improve their condition. In sum, individuals had a very limited control over their life.

The 1978 "open door" policy brought about the market economy and now the individual has more initiative, more freedom of movement, and the rule is that those who work more get more wealth. Of course, things are never so straightforward. The accumulation of wealth doesn't depend only on how much you work, but also on power and class. But in general, in the market economy, normal people—the vast majority of people—can only gain wealth by the work of their hands, and the amount of wealth they can get is directly proportional to the amount of time they spend working. So in the city of Huzhou [where *Bitter Money* is set] as everywhere else in China, people seek to make more money working up to 13 hours per day. This is what the people who come from the bottom of society do. It is what they have to do to face the hardships of life.

One of the ways to get rich quickly that is used by the workers in *Bitter Money* is a sort of pyramid scheme scam: workers basically trick their fellow-workers into investing in a non-existent business run by some shady company, in order to appropriate part of the investment money. It is a struggle between the poor…
In the economic chain, from the top to the bottom, everybody wants to have money in order to conquer a certain freedom from need. No matter how slim the chance of making money is, people will try everything they can to make profit and acquire a certain "freedom in life." However, people coming from the bottom of society have very small chances, very few options. It is not easy for them to live in this world. Most of the time, in addition to working their asses off every day, they have to find other sources of income. So what can they do? We shouldn't judge the people in *Bitter Money* too harshly for the pyramid scheme scam. Our life is very different from theirs. If we were in their shoes, if we had to face the hardships that they have to face, we would probably do the pyramid scheme scam as well.

***Bitter Money* shows us the capitalist trap at work. People accept to be exploited to get as much money as possible, but then somehow money just vanishes from their pockets, because they have to pay for the rent, the food, the drinks, the cell-phone, the gambling… The older man that we see drunk in the sewing workshop is a mirror held up to your young protagonists—his hopes ground up in this big machine of exploitation. Do you think that the young people realize this? Do you think that they learn something from him?**
The young people that you see in *Bitter Money* will soon become like the older person. This is certain. Age aside, the life of all the workers in my film is more or less the same: they work in the factory, they eat in the factory, they sleep in the factory. They have no life in the outside world. They all work endlessly, they save every penny made from sewing clothes. The only difference is that the young people have less of a burden to cope with: they are in good health, they are still strong and energetic, they haven't married, they have no

life in the outside world. They all work endlessly, they save every penny made from sewing clothes. The only difference is that the young people have less of a burden to cope with: they are in good health, they are still strong and energetic, they haven't married, they have no children, their parents are still relatively young and perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. These young people don't have too much pressure from life yet. If they had as much pressure as the older guy that you see in Bitter Money, they would start breaking in the same way. The older guy has been slaving away for such a long time and his life is still the same. His condition didn't improve at all. Therefore, he is disappointed with himself, he becomes bitter, he gets drunk. He has a family to provide for: a wife, a child. Plus, his parents are old and ill, and they need money, too. The pressure is too much for him to handle. In comparison, young people have less pressure and, after spending for board and lodging, they have something left for themselves. So even if they all belong to the same social class, the young people think that they are better than the older guy and laugh at him. In my view, the fact that the young people laugh at their older fellow worker means that they haven't seen life clearly. They haven't seen their future clearly. They haven't learned anything yet.

This is the delusion of young age, it is very common. I experienced the same delusion myself. When I was younger, I lived passionately. I was very passionate and idealistic about each and every movie I made. I still am in a way, but after almost 20 years in the film industry I finally realized that it is impossible for me to break through certain limitations, certain invisible barriers. Of course, people would think that these limitations come from the lack of money. They do, but actually it is not just about money. It is the way the whole industry works that creates limitations. The mainstream ideology of our society creates limitations. The fierce competition between people creates limitations.

I knew about these issues from the start, ever since the beginning of my career, but I didn't care much. I thought that many issues will soon be solved somehow. I thought that I could solve all my problems simply by working hard. Unfortunately, I was wrong, and I am now facing the same challenges that I was facing when I made my first film. Nothing has changed for me, nothing has improved in all these years. It is I who have changed over time. I changed from a person who has hopes and passion about the film industry, a person believing in the creative power of imagination, to a disillusioned person who knows that the reality of the film industry will never ever change. So I have come to accept the fact that I have to live within this immutable system. Now I feel released.

At the beginning of my career, I thought that there were a lot of possibilities in filmmaking. I was naive, I was dreaming. As time went by, the possibilities vanished one by one. When you cannot achieve your dream, what can you do? You learn to live in the real world. That's why I totally accept and embrace my status. Now I simply try to reach my dream within the concrete possibilities that I have. That's the only thing I can do. An individual is too small and weak to change the whole society. The people in my movies and I, we are all the same in a way: we are frail, we work hard and we live day by day.

In *Ta'ang* people always talk about money and money is always shown. In *Bitter Money* people always talk about money but money is never shown.

I am not sure this fact you highlight was intentional on my part. But I would like to talk about the title "bitter money" for a minute. The title is very important and it was chosen carefully. In Huzhou "bitter money" is a slang expression that workers use to say "I am going away from home to work." It is a very common way of saying in this city, everyone uses it. Coming from Northern China, I had never heard of this expression before, and I was curious about it. So over the course of the shooting, I understood why they call work bitter money: all these workers have migrated to Huzhou from other regions, with the hope of making money. The word "bitter" alludes to the discriminations that the individual has to face when he

is away from home to earn money, working like hell all day, every day, with no personal life whatsoever. You can see the money or you cannot see it, but it is the "bitter" taste of money I am interested in.

Bitter Money won the award for best screenplay at the Venice Film Festival, but of course you wrote no screenplay for the movie. Did you find it strange to win this prize?

What can I say? I don't have any particular feelings about this prize. The judges decided to give me the screenplay prize. I cannot control the way judges think. I accept whatever prize festivals eventually decide to give me, and I am happy that people show interest in my work.

As all your documentaries, _Ta'ang_ and _Bitter Money_ have an open ending. Why do you never "close" your movies?

I understand what you are getting at, but personally I don't want to make any metaphor out of my open endings. I want to engage the audience by showing an individual's life, not by making metaphors. My movies can only observe a more or less short time period in a person's life, then the shooting is over and postproduction starts. Let's say that, since I cannot foresee the future, my films always have an open ending. [_Laughter_]

There is a domestic violence story in _Bitter Money_. What do you think of the law passed by the Chinese government in late 2015, outlawing domestic violence? Do you think it is useful?

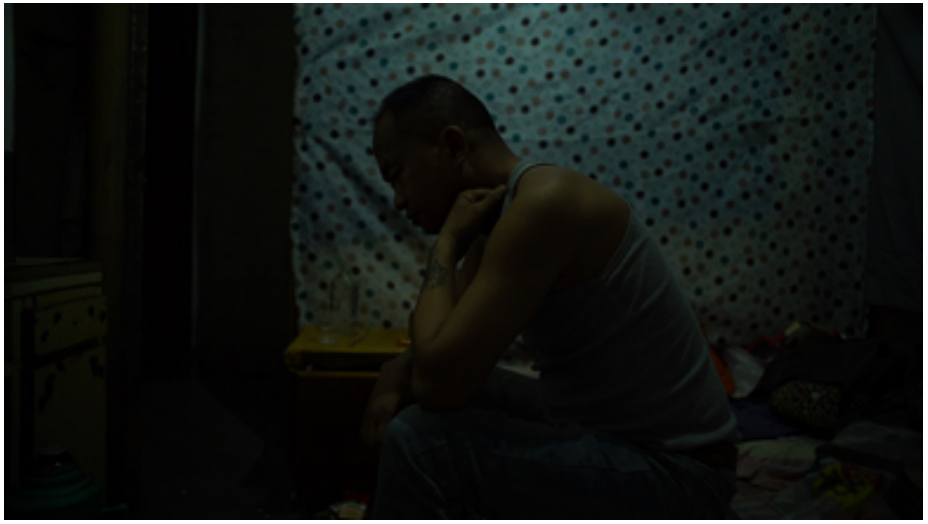
Laws are just formal rules through which people try to deal with the issues that they have with each other. Unfortunately, issues between husband and wife cannot be solved by one single law. These issues are so complicated, human beings are so complicated.

Are _Ta'ang_ and _Bitter Money_ getting released in Chinese theaters?

No, they are not. All my movies have never been released in Chinese theaters.

Why?

There are pre-conditions for movies to fulfill, if they are to be released in Chinese theaters. In order to be released in China, my movies would have to pass censorship from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. I have never applied for this censorship exam and I never will. I think it is boring and meaningless. Ever since the beginning of my career, my one and only wish has been to be able to express whatever I want. So I will never let other people "examine" my movie. I don't need the approval of anyone.



Bitter Money

Click here for further information.

Interview: Wang Bing

Film Comment | February 22, 2017

By Michael Guarneri and Jin Wang

CINEASTE

Two adolescent boys sit on a small bed watching television; they look down from time to time to play on mobile phones while the machine's white noise continues. Their father's shadow appears on the wall as he bids them goodbye before leaving for work and tells them goodnight after the day concludes. The boys stay reclining inside the cluttered hut during the hours that pass in between.

The Chinese filmmaker Wang Bing's most recent feature-length film, *Father and Sons* (2014), takes place almost entirely inside the cramped, factory-owned living space that has been given to the worker Cai Shunhua for him and his sons Yongjin and Yonggao to inhabit. Wang's level gaze stays in the room with the boys over the course of a few days, during which very little seems to happen. It watches them as, in the absence of things to do in the industrial area outside their home, they find ways to pass the time indoors.

Father and Sons grew out of Wang's earlier feature, *Three Sisters* (2012), in which the two boys appeared in their native Yunnan Province village in southwestern China (shared by the title characters) several months before their father took them to live with him. The film's patient, attentive manner of presenting people has belonged to Wang's filmmaking ever since his debut film, the three-part documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002), a depiction of a dying factory district's residents' efforts to keep functioning while their homes and jobs vanish. Throughout his films, Wang has worked in close proximity to the people he records, most of whom come from Chinese society's lower levels. Wang builds his films by studying how they interact with their surroundings over time.

These observational films employ long, steady shots that encourage viewers to adapt to the rhythms of a person's daily life. A theme that emerges throughout them is the ongoing effort people make to find freedom within material confines. The rural girls in Three Sisters, for instance, have been essentially abandoned by their parents at story's outset, forcing the ten-year-old Yingying into the position of having to raise her two younger siblings. The camera unobtrusively follows the girls while Yingying leads them in performing chores such as feeding and tending to farm animals and making fire with which to cook potatoes. As time passes and the seasons change, they also roam across wide fields and ease their loneliness by finding moments to play.

***'Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013)—which Wang shot in Yunnan Province in between the makings of Three Sisters and Father and Sons—takes place primarily on one floor of an unnamed mental hospital. The film's viewpoint shifts among several inmates, some of who have been locked up for more than a decade for reasons that remain unclear. Over and over, isolated men appear sprinting around the floor's narrow corridors until returning to shared quarters. In many cases, the person's family has abandoned him, and he lacks and longs for tenderness. Mundane activities such as dressing and undressing oneself, lighting a cigarette, and lying beneath a blanket with another inmate come to seem like peoples' declarations of their own humanity.**

Wang was born in 1967 (shortly after the start of the Cultural Revolution) and raised in a rural part of Northwest China's Shaanxi Province. As a teenager, he took over his deceased father's job in a construction design firm, where he performed various duties while unsuccessfully aspiring to become an architect. He eventually studied photography at the Lu Xun Arts Academy in Shenyang—a large city close to the Tie Xi district that he would eventually film—then cinema at the Beijing Film Academy. He

graduated at a time when inexpensive digital filmmaking tools were becoming readily available, and after trying and failing to gain steady work within the Chinese film and television industry, set out on his own as a documentarian. He has since worked prolifically and won a number of international festival prizes; he has also (like many Chinese independent filmmakers) failed to have his films shown commercially in his homeland, and often struggled to finance his projects.
In chronicling individual, present-day lives, Wang gives a sense of his country's recent history. The films rarely delve directly into discussions of government policies, with works such as 2007's *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* and 2010's *The Ditch* (which recall the fates of victims of the Cultural Revolution through documentary interviewing and fictionalized re-enactments, respectively) proving more exceptions than rules in this regard. Political critiques are instead largely left implicit, and made through Wang's act of allying himself with people that have been pushed onto his culture's fringes. The films suggest that China's transition from Maoism to an assimilation of capitalism has not only failed to improve, but actually worsened the lives of many of its citizens, who survive in spite of it.

The people that Wang records are ones who move him, as evidenced by his willingness to let them guide the films. I interviewed the director at this year's edition of the Rotterdam International Film Festival, where he had come to present *Father and Sons*.

Cineaste: How did you become a filmmaker?
Wang Bing: I have made *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* and many other films, but I have never really thought of myself as a filmmaker. Often in life you don't know what you should be doing. For me, making films is a way to avoid wasting my time. Nobody needs me to do anything, so I need to do something for myself. My first film premiered thirteen years ago, when I was thirty-five years old and still had many ideals. But actually, there are many things in life that we want to do and that we never get around to doing.

I don't think that my films have much to do with my background. I had never planned to do this. For about a decade I worked in a construction design studio and was very interested in architecture, but I was never able to acquire the education necessary to be allowed to design the buildings. I applied for several architecture university programs and was never accepted, so I had to do other tasks. In the end, I decided that it would be easier to get into a good school for cinema than one for architecture. I succeeded in entering university and studied first photography, then cinema.

After I graduated, I had a hard time finding work. In China, to procure work in the film industry you need the right contacts, which I didn't have. I thought that I would make a documentary for myself, without knowing anything about documentary filmmaking—in university I had only been given fiction films to study and hadn't thought at all about documentaries. (There are very few classes in Chinese films schools that include documentaries in their curriculums.) So I just filmed however I thought would be good. I filmed however I wanted.

The result was *West of the Tracks,* which I filmed in a district near the arts university that I had attended in the city of Shenyang. What made the biggest impression on me in that area was the snow. In winter it snowed constantly. In that film there is a lot of snow, and throughout my films, I pay attention to the seasons and their passing. The reason for this is that I don't want the audience just to see a small part of a person's life, but rather a person along with his or her background. I tend to film people for quite long periods of time. If you show somebody's life over a long period, then you come to understand him or her better.

Cineaste: How does filming over long periods impact your storytelling?
Wang: I think that the most interesting thing to do in films is not to create a story—in any case, I'm not the kind of director who sets out to create one. I prefer to look at people. If you look at an interesting person for a while, then you will realize that in that person's life there is a very

interesting story. When I meet someone and his or her story really attracts me, then I decide that I would like to make a film about him or her. When I decide that there's something really beautiful about that person, and that his or her life really touches me, is the moment when I want to film.

In a person's life, of course, many big things happen, but the moments of tenderness are what most interest me. The relationships that people have with their family members and with friends are the most important things in their lives. Those relationships are what I want to show. Usually I just film, and then I edit, and then I present the results. My films are often very simple and tell very simple stories. If I lay out a plot structure beforehand, then I will have imprisoned the story. I prefer instead to let it develop and grow outside of my control.

Cineaste: How do you approach the people whose stories you tell?

Wang: The approach I take is very simple, really. I go to a place and meet someone. I suddenly feel that that person is interesting, and from there, my crew and I begin to film. I ask technicians to come work with me when they have time and jobs that don't pay very well, without really considering their levels of experience. (The pay that I can offer them is so low that I can't really do so.) I tell them how and where to film, and often I hold the camera myself. I use lightweight digital equipment, so the process of filmmaking becomes a lot easier than it would have been in the past. And I tell very simple stories. I have found in my work that people at all levels of society are basically the same. They're all very complicated. I keep my distance from them during the period of filming in order not to disturb them emotionally, or to change any of their moods or habits. At the same time, when I film them, I can't help but get close because there's something about them that attracts me and that I really like. So there is always a tension. On the one hand, I don't want to disturb them; on the other hand, I have my own feelings towards them.

I can talk about the girls in *Three Sisters,* whose mother had left them when they were quite small. Their father had gone out to another town to work and left them on their own to live. By the time that I began making the film, Yingying was the oldest of the girls at age ten and had to take care of her two little sisters, Zhenzhen and Fenfen, who were six and four. Although Yingying was young, she was very mature.

When I came by their house and saw them playing in the courtyard for the first time, I saw something in them that made them seem different from other children. Despite my being a stranger, they invited me into their home. They were cooking potatoes over a fire because that was all that they had to eat. The sight of them cooking made a deep impression on me. This made me want to film them, and so I did.

Their father eventually returned to the village for a short time, and then took the two younger girls back to the town where he was working. Only Yingying was left. At first, she didn't have anyone to play with, then she eventually found two brothers with whom she got along well, especially the older one. They would go into the mountains, play together, herd sheep, and collect manure to burn. They had a lot of freedom. Their life at that point was very simple and innocent, and even romantic in a rural way. These two boys had also impressed me, but the film we were making focused on the girls, and so there was no time to give much attention to them.

The boys' mother had also left when they were young, and their father was working elsewhere. The father later came back and took them with him to live. In December of 2012, I was working in the Yunnan Province in southern China, and I passed by their home in order to see them. I felt very bad for them, because it was a rather hopeless situation. When I came into their house, I saw that they shared a tiny bed that was only slightly larger than the table at which I am sitting right now. Three people had to sleep in that bed, and I just couldn't wrap my mind around how.

That little bed was the thing that made the deepest impression on me. We didn't have much money or time to work with the

family, so I thought that I would make a piece of video art, rather than a proper film. When I decided that I would make Father and Sons I thought, "Well, I'll film this father and his two sons and their small bed." That would be enough. Initially, it was intended to be shown only as an installation at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, but after it showed there, several film festivals also invited it to play as a film.

Cineaste: How did the making of 'Til Madness Do Us Part coincide with those of Three Sisters and ofFather and Sons?

Wang: It actually began in 2002, while I was still editing *West of the Tracks*. I went to visit a psychiatric hospital in the suburbs of Beijing. When I arrived there, it was very windy and all the doors were open, but I didn't see any people—just lots of fallen leaves. I walked around until I arrived outside one building, within which I could hear many voices. I entered and looked through a glass door. It was very dark, but I could see skinny people on the other side. I opened the door quietly. The nurse on guard thought that I was a family member of one of the patients, but I said that I was just visiting and asked if I could look around. She saw that I had no bad intentions and let me in.

I talked a bit with the patients, most of whom were very thin and very old. I learned that they had been placed in the hospital in the 1960s and 1970s. Their household registrations had been transferred to the hospital, which meant that they were officially registered as living there and so could not move. They may have been sick, but they still acted like normal people, and they really wanted to make contact and to talk with me. I afterward often went to the hospital, and I asked its directors if I could make a documentary there. They continued to refuse up through 2009, at which point I gave up that plan.

Then, early in 2012, when I was filming *Three Sisters* in Yunnan, the director of a psychiatric hospital in the area told me that I could film inside his complex. I thought that this was an important opportunity, but we had just shot *Three Sisters* and I had no budget left. I asked some producers who had previously worked with me if they could find money to finance a new project, and they all said no except for a Japanese producer who gave me twenty thousand American dollars. In January of 2013, I returned to Yunnan to film *'Til Madness Do Us Part*.

The hospital staff in Yunnan gave me the freedom to film wherever I wanted, but I didn't feel very good and had doubts about whether I could do it. If you shoot in a place without knowing anything about it, then your film can easily become very bad. Additionally, we were given only three weeks to film there, and in my opinion that was not enough time. So every day, we worked from seven or eight a.m. until midnight or one a.m. There was no time to relax or to do anything else.

By the end of the first week, it had become clear to me how we should make the film. By the end of the three weeks, though, I still felt like there were some stories that we had not told fully. As our money was almost finished, I had no choice but to return to Beijing. I stayed there for a month, and then eventually returned to the hospital and shot for another week, which allowed me to wrap up the film.

I wanted to emphasize, both in the filming and in the editing, things that I had wondered while spending time with psychiatric patients. How had they gotten their illnesses? What did their illnesses do and mean? How did the people feel? How can you separate a person from his or her illness?

A problem of psychiatric hospitals is that the patients are basically cast out by society and by their families. Nobody really cares about whether they can recover from what they have. Of course, there were some cases in that hospital where you didn't know if a person was actually ill at all, but had still been locked up. Some people are in there because they have mental illnesses, and some people have something else going on. Most of the men were in there because they had moved from their villages to urban locations in order to work and had had mental collapses as a result of doing so. Most of the women had been diagnosed and interned after

having had babies under China's family planning policy. The patients have very complicated histories and backgrounds, and every day they are just in there, completely separate from the rest of the world.

Cineaste: What do you think about the direction in which Chinese society is heading?

Wang: Throughout China these days, the family unit is less stable than it used to be. Partly for economic reasons, there are many more broken homes now than there were in the past. Many people don't have complete families or fixed places to call home. Their lives are much more unstable than before and are much more floating now.

It's very difficult to say in which direction China is developing. It's not that I don't want to say. It's that it's really, really hard to say. Of course, what I can offer is completely my own opinion. It doesn't count for more than that. I think that China is changing very little right now, especially in its politics. In places like the former Soviet Union and much of Eastern Europe, for example, many things have changed over the past twenty years, but in China during this same time I think that very little has changed.

The reason why change is happening so slowly, I think, is that the people who want China to change don't represent the ideas and thoughts of the majority of the population. Most Chinese people don't know what the future will be, their own or that of China, because they just haven't developed any opinions about it. Some people at the higher levels of society have done so, such as intellectuals and some businesspeople, but people like those I film—who don't have much education, who don't have any money, and who live very poor lives—think differently. So I don't believe that there will be much change in my country.

Cineaste: Do you have a goal in mind when you begin making your films?

Wang: No. When I see something that really interests me, I simply go and record it. I shot many films at the same time and none of them are finished yet. For example, I met a woman and was filming her. Next to her was sitting another woman who I felt was a really interesting character, and even while I was filming the first woman, I felt the story gradually moving towards the second. Her husband was clearly beating her, but she hadn't left, even though there was no hope for her family. Through her story, you can see problems facing people at the lowest levels of Chinese society. They're not secure in their marriages and family lives. They lack direction. They exist only in a state of worry.

I think that stories like hers are good stories to film. In the story of such a real person, you can see something true. I don't like stories that are overly designed or made up. I think that a story should not be limited in the way that it grows and in how it develops. That is the way I think that movies should be made.

Cineaste: You have made one fiction feature—The Ditch. Do you believe you will return to fiction?

Wang: A big difficulty I face in making fiction films is that I don't have freedom—no freedom in different aspects, from political to financial. I can't make fiction films right now and don't really want to, so I make documentaries to pass the time instead.

Click here for further information.

I am just a simple individual who films what he loves to film
Interview with Wang Bing

La Furia Umana | 8 April 2014

By Michael Guarneri

When I was nineteen I came home one morning after a party and, since I couldn't sleep, I tuned in to Fuori Orario Rai3. They were broadcasting the first part of Wang Bing's *Tie Xi Qu – West of the Tracks* (2003), the one called "Fabbriche" [Factories] in Italian. The movie had started a couple of hours before my tuning in, so I watched it from halfway onwards. Time flew by: it was not that I liked or disliked the film, *Tie Xi Qu* was simply something I had never seen before.

Flash-forward six years, I made a twenty-five hour trip in order to meet Wang Bing in Paris and talk with him for forty-five minutes. Life is all about time, dedication, and doing what you think is right and meaningful. So is cinema, as you are about to read.

Huge thanks to Shi Hang (interpreter), Luca Bertarini (additional translation), Viviana Andriani (Rendez-Vous Press), Isabelle Glachant (Chinese Shadows) and mon ami Raphaël Nieuwjaer.

Michael Guarneri: How's it going with your Shanghai film project?

Wang Bing: I haven't started shooting the film yet. I am still making preparations, we are still in the pre-production phase, so to speak.

MG: What story (or stories) are you going to tell, within the city of Shanghai?

WB: The city of Shanghai is immense and it is divided into a lot of districts, so there are a lot of areas in which one can decide to shoot. I do not intend to shoot necessarily in the city centre. As a matter of fact, what I want to do is to tell stories of men and women in their twenties living in the suburbs of Shanghai: I want to follow the love stories taking place in the urban area.

MG: "To follow" is an interesting verb: can you tell me more about your idea of narration, of storytelling?

WB: Literature and cinema tell stories. We all tell stories. Our lives themselves are stories. Stories are everywhere and there are a lot of ways in which stories can be told, according to the various literary or cinematographic conventions. As far as I am concerned, I am not interested in what is usually called "storytelling", that is to say I am not trying to narrate something I invented. I am not making things up. What I am after is the transformation, or "translation", of real life into something made of moving images and sound. Through cinema, I want to immortalize this or that slice of everyday, real life.

MG: In *Feng Ai – 'Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013), I really liked the scene in which a young, supposedly insane man starts running and the cameraman, after a moment of reflection, starts running after him, all around the corridor of the mental hospital. I think this scene can be a great metaphor for your filmmaking practice: a man with a digital camera following people...

WB: At the time of the shooting, in early 2013, this young man had not been in the psychiatric hospital for long. He had just been forcibly admitted to the facility, so he still felt the desire of leaving: he was resisting his present condition with all his strength, he wanted to run away from his life in the hospital... He wanted to break free, even if it was actually impossible for him to escape from the institution. As I got to know this young man, I decided to show his personal acts of resistance against the life in the hospital: he does not sleep at night, he leaves his room and runs around the corridor, all alone, until he's exhausted. By means of the link between the young man and the camera, I wanted to show his restlessness, his agitation. I think this is the way in which an important aspect of his life can be understood by the audience.

As a matter of fact, every story is meant to be perceived by an audience: stories exist because people tell them to other people. This brings us back to the concept of "story". Everyone has his or her own idea of what a story should be: some stories are considered funny, some are considered interesting, while others are deemed boring and useless, and they are never even told... For most people, telling a story is like walking along a road: a certain logic must be followed, with rules and procedures codified by other narrators in the past. For me, however, it is different. For me, a story doesn't belong to this or that literary or cinematographic tradition, but to people's lives. For me, a story must contain elements taken from everyday life, and it should bring people closer together.

MG: Is there a link between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, between the mundane, little stories of unknown people and the Grand History of the People, of the Nation?

WB: In a certain sense, yes: of course, it exists a link between China as a Country in a given historical moment and a Chinese man or woman living in China in that given moment. At the same time, though, Chinese society is made of individuals, as any other society. In the past, the Chinese individual accepted to be part of the whole, whereas these days things have changed: today it's as if the bond between the individual and the community "loosened", and the individual is not anymore a "representative sample" of modern society or Nation as a whole.

Personally, I think that true History and reality are the actions and the everyday experiences of the individuals. In China – and in Chinese cinema especially – there are very few narrations focused on individuals. Very, very few. They prefer to tell the Grand History of the People, of the Nation, of the Party. As for me, I am a filmmaker who focuses on individuals: nobody forces me to film the History of the Nation. It is not at all my vocation. I am interested in the individual within the Chinese society, I want to tell his or her specific and concrete story.

MG: It seems to me that traveling is an essential aspect of your filmmaking practice. I think you are a little bit like an explorer...

WB: I have traveled a lot, it is true, but I don't really think I am an explorer. Why do I travel? I travel because China is an immense country. I live in Beijing and to reach, say, the south-western province of Yunnan where *San Zimei – Three Sisters*(2012) and *Feng Ai* were shot, I had to travel thousands and thousands of kilometers. Moreover, I shot films both in North-East China [Dongbei] and in North-West China. It is the immensity of Chinese territory and the desire of making films that "force me" to travel and leave my everyday routine behind, in Beijing.

MG: You always say that the human relationship with the people you film is very important. Can you tell me about that?

WB: If you go someplace and film a person you don't know at all, it is difficult to represent his or her life in a complete way; it is difficult to show what this person thinks, what he/she does and why. I think that the most important thing is to gain a good knowledge of the people you are going to film. Otherwise, it is difficult to penetrate their inner world and understand their life, and this could damage your film.

MG: Do you think that the camera is a sort of "weapon" that may hurt the people that are being filmed?

WB: There are a lot of things that may hurt people: the camera, as a means of communication, is one of them. I think that it all depends on those who make the film. It depends above all on the film's director, who has a responsibility both towards the people that appear in the film and the people that are going to watch the film. The members of the audience have their own importance and responsibilities too, because certain comments about the film can hurt the people that appear in the film.

MG: I imagine that the human and professional relationship with the members of your troupe is also important. Can you tell me about this aspect of your work?

WB: I don't have a "permanent troupe". On the contrary, I work alone for most of the time. When I feel like developing a specific project and making it into a film, I simply look for friends who are willing to help me out and I ask for their temporary assistence. I do not have permanent collaborators and I do not require permanent work relations: my film crew is composed of the most suitable persons for following the single project I am working on at a given moment.

MG: In the West your films are screened in the most important film festivals, and you are called "an artist". Do you consider yourself an artist? Do you like being called "artist"?

WB: To be honest, I don't really care. I think that what they call me is not important. I do not intend to say that I don't care about what other people think; on the contrary, I like very much being part of this environment because of the respect other people show me and the praise my works receive. But after all, you know, the epithet "artist" can also be used in a pejorative sense towards people like me, who make very long films, outside canons and standards, outside the market and the industry, with a personal and non-conventional style... Thus, "artist" can be an insult at times, making fun of those who do not do "normal" things. [Laughs] Anyway, the notion of "artist" is indifferent to me, both in its laudatory and pejorative sense: people are free to think what they want about my work.

MG: A thing I find very interesting is that you studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, but in your films the images are never "fine and perfect". What is a "beautiful image", in your opinion?

WB: In my view, the most important thing to keep in mind is that a film is not a still image. Beauty in cinema is not something that you can stop and "immortalize"; it is not something forever frozen into one single exposure. Beauty in cinema is the perception of an ongoing process. As a filmmaker, I am interested in movement, in moving images, in the "evolution" of the real that is so difficult to capture and make visible.

MG: After completing your studies at Beijing Film Academy and before starting the making of *Tie Xi Qu*, what did you do? Where did you work?

WB: Once I finished the training course for camera operators at Beijing Film Academy (it was the end of 1997), I occupied a temporary place at the Chinese Agency for Information, Documentary and Film Production, an organization controlled by the Communist Party. There I contributed to a propaganda documentary film called *Zhou Enlai's Diplomatic Charisma*. I worked for the government's film studio for a year. Then I helped out some friends with their film projects, and another year passed. At that time, I was working for other people, not for myself... As all the young graduates, I tried to enter the labour market and find my place in Chinese society. I tried to take my chances and have a successful career in the Chinese film industry. However, since I am of humble origins and my family is not rich, it was very difficult to make it. Moreover, I had no "connections", that is to say I didn't know important people in the film business, so it was almost impossible for me to get a job in major film productions. This is why, in the end, I decided to work on my own film projects and I started making *Tie Xi Qu*.

MG: Here in the West, we like to

think that all Chinese artists are activists opposing the Chinese government. Are you a dissident?

WB: I don't think I am a dissident and I don't think my films are "political films". I am not a "political filmmaker", because I have no political claims, no political program, no political agenda to put forward. I am interested in the personal, inner life of the individuals who live in Chinese society. What I try to do is just to look at life and put my personal experience and my past in relation with other people's personal experiences. I look at human everyday life and of course, by doing so, I bring to the screen everyday life issues, some of which are the so called "problems of society". I repeat: personally, I have no political purposes and ambitions. It is true that in my films there are moments in which political affairs are discussed, but this is normal, because in China a lot of things are directly influenced by the Communist Party and politics is everywhere. If I decided to omit the relation between political context and everyday life in my films, *then* I'd be a "political filmmaker": in fact, in the China of today, the real "political films" are those that carefully avoid mentioning anything political.

MG: It seems to me that you use the newest digital technology in order to realize a very old dream, possibly the Lumière Brothers' dream: going to the most faraway places and bringing back some images, making the world visible – "the world within reach". There are indeed a lot of things to see about China, and it's as if we haven't seen anything yet. What prevents us from seeing and knowing?

WB: I think the most important obstacle is geographical. Between Europe and China there is an immense distance and the natural barriers created (and still create) problems in reciprocal comprehension. A second barrier of sorts is History. The History of China and the History of the West are extremely different: we do not have a common past or background, and this might create misunderstandings. The third factor is politics.

MG: What prevents you from making all the films you have in mind?

WB: There are two main obstacles. First of all, you must understand that contemporary Chinese society is very commercial and very commercialized, that is to say a society in which nothing can be done without money. This is particularly true for Chinese cinema: Chinese commercial cinema is a huge business in which money is invested in order to make profit. Hence, someone like me – someone who isn't rich and who is not interested in making commercial films – cannot get funding and cannot make all the films he would like to. As a matter of fact, there are a lot of film projects of mine that have never been made or completed for economic reasons.

Secondly, for a filmmaker like me, there might be difficulties in the shooting phase: I do not have the freedom of shooting all I want, where I want and when I want.

All in all, given the conditions of production of a fiction film in China, at the moment it is impossible for me to shoot the two fictional film projects I have in mind. This is why I keep on making documentary films about the everyday life of real people: I like the projects, and they are easier and more economical to make.

MG: I read that in China your films circulate on pirated DVDs only. How much is a pirated copy of a film of yours in China?

WB: It depends. In some places it is more expensive than in others. In general, the price for any pirated DVD is 7 or 8 yuan, that is to say about one Euro.

MG: Does it bother you that your films circulate for free on the Internet all over the world?

WB: I do not care about that at all.

MG: One of the first films in the History of Cinema is *La Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon* (1895), i.e. *Workers leaving the factory*. As a matter of fact, throughout the History of Cinema we have never seen workers actually working their shifts, except for a few examples.

One of these exceptions is your magnum opus *Caiyou Riji – Crude Oil* (2008). Why was it important for you to make us see people working?

WB: I made this sort of "video-art" on the invitation of the Rotterdam Film Festival. At that time, all my projects were being made in North-West China, in the region where the Great Desert [Gobi Desert] is. These desertic areas are uninhabited for the most part and, as all the men who find themselves face to face with boundless wilderness, I developed a feeling of fascination, respect and fear towards the desert. However, while I was staying in the region, I accidentally found out that there actually were some people working and living in the desert. So a thought appeared in my mind: "What are these people doing in the midst of nowhere? What is their job, their occupation?". *Caiyou Riji*was born out of simple curiosity: curiosity pushed me to film the lives of the oil field workers.

MG: Another thing I find interesting, in *Caiyou Riji* as in other films of yours, is the fact that we never see the boss. I mean the "big boss of it all"...

WB: [Laughs] Yes, it is an interesting phenomenon. As the Gobi Desert workers dig deep in the middle of nowhere looking for oil, in our busy cities we have workers building things in construction sites all day long. Then, if you go to a real estate company, you'll see young, good-looking girls selling housing development projects, houses, warehouses, stores – the very things the aforementioned construction workers are building. Indeed, wherever we go, all we can see are people of modest condition working hard, long shifts, being it manual labour or trade. These are the people "in the forefront", these are the people we can see. We never manage to see the people "behind" this work, we never see the people "upstairs" pulling the strings. Who are they? Where are they? In my films as in reality, we only see humble people breaking their backs, but they are not the ones "in charge". They are not in control.

MG: You have been quoted saying that China's ideological past was communist idealism, while China's present is marked by capitalistic egoism. Can you tell me about that?

WB: In the past, in China, there was a very explicit and severe system at work. What I mean is that the exercise of power by the government over the individuals was very direct and evident: the Party ruled people through direct administrative and political means. Today, on the contrary, the rules of society are made almost exclusively by economic means and for economic purposes, as if politics had become the same as economy.

However, I am just a simple individual who films what he loves to film. I am neither a sociologist nor an economist, thus I don't think I am capable of listing and discussing all the problems Chinese society has; and besides, as I told you, I do not film society. I film individuals living their everyday lives.

MG: What is your social class, as a filmmaker?

WB: I lead a simple, normal life. My condition is average. I would say I am an average Chinese citizen.

MG: I read that you admire Pier Paolo Pasolini's films a lot, so I was wondering: what exactly do you like about them?

WB: I am fascinated by the fact that Pasolini was setting higher and higher standards for himself with every new film project of his. He was constantly raising the bar, and he demanded a lot from himself. I cannot really judge or comment on Pasolini's work as a film director. As a simple spectator, by watching his films, I discovered his strong desire of communicating in spite of all the limits due to the historical period he was living in; I discovered his will to use cinema to cross the boundaries and be free. In his films I can see how rigorous and self-demanding he was: I like this energy, this strictness, this perfectionism, this total commitment and dedication.

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Limited Shelter: An Interview with Wang Bing

Notebook Interview | 23 September 2013

By Daniel Kasman

An interview with the Chinese independent director of the asylum documentary "'Til Madness Do Us Part".

Wang Bing's camera nearly becomes a prisoner alongside other Chinese in *'Til Madness Do Us Apart*, a documentary with rare access to a mental hospital *cum*prison dedicated to an incredible spectrum of patients *cum* prisoners, ranging from those in genuine need of care to those picked up for brawling, committed by family members, or simply unknown miscreants found and locked away. With only two exceptions the nearly four hour film remains trapped along with the male prisoners in the top floor of the building, which has a square patio in its center and as such the single hallway, open to that center but barred, traces a shape around it which the patients—and the camera—wander, as there is nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. This lone, looped hallway opens only to spare, cramped bedrooms, one bathroom, and a single TV room; except for the TV to watch, all the activity the patients have available to them is to shuffle around, talk to one another, or, like Wang's camera, simply watch and follow their fellow man.

In this spare edifice with the color and texture of worn sandpaper the living conditions have a terrifying equalizing effect: nearly all patients/inmates look and act the same, and only truly erratic behavior suggests some might be mentally ill and others not, some very sad and others not, some very upset and others not. Treatment is limited and evaluation is not apparent, the doctors only occasionally hovering around the frame's edge. As such, the film is given to the sustained sense of resignation that permeates the punishing, monotonous limitations of the space (other floors can be seen, including one for women, as well as surrounding buildings outside the windows of the complex) and the passive demeanor of the inhabitants, who only rarely act out and seem to spend most of their time, day and night, trying to sleep. A lone revelation of the lower level feeding floor seems like a godsend, especially as the men are so constantly trying to obtain more and different food from their visitors, whose rare appearances and surprisingly lengthy stays likewise seem like mana from the heavens even to those who just get to spectate awkward or moving reunions. The sole chance for the camera to leave the complex—following a prisoner granted leave to go home to his parents' hovel—shows us an exterior world of options for these men as desolate and bleak in its openness as the hospital-prison is in its claustrophobic, false shelter.

I had the chance to sit down with the director at the Toronto International Film Festival and talk to him about his new documentary. Special thanks to Alexandria Fung for her excellent translation.

NOTEBOOK: I was wondering if you could talk about how you found this hospital.

WANG BING: It has been quite a few years in waiting. We've always tried to look for one. Almost no hospitals or institutions would want you to come in and film them, so it has been a long time. It was just a very accidental opportunity that I bumped into the subject matter. I was editing my film *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* that's about a section of Shenyang. I was almost finishing the editing Beijing. I was in a remote area...it was almost like an empty field with three buildings, so I went to check out what they were, and it turned out each building was full of people, and each floor, full of people. It turned out they were institutions. I wrote a script for a fictional feature after being in that institution, because I was allowed to go into it but not allowed to film, which is why I wanted to do a fictional feature. Actually I went to Cannes and was actually saying this was going to be my project. But for various reasons that didn't happen. I went back to that institution in 2009 and a lot of people I had met earlier had passed away; a lot of the people had been institutionalized for 20, 30 years. The actual, physical organization of that institution and the one I ended up filming was different, but the way they lived in each was actually very similar. Then, last year this opportunity came because a friend had talked to someone there and they said they were willing to support our idea, so this hospital is very willing to let us in and do what we want to do.

NOTEBOOK: What was it about the project that appealed to this particular institution?

WANG: The staff there, the doctors there, have a very—in a word—hopelessness, a helplessness in their attitude. It is their job to manage and facilitate the treatment of the patients and they have lots of difficulties doing that. At the same time, they also feel that the patients there, the people who are institutionalized there, have such a difficult life, so the doctors have such feelings both towards their work and the people. By being there, by doing the filming there, by spending time with the doctors and the staff members there, you realize that they are not treating the people badly, they are not bad to these people. But them as individuals, each doctor, each staff member, doesn't have any way to change how that these people are living there.

NOTEBOOK: My impression was—and I don't know if this was due to strictures laid out by the staff, or realities of the space, or your choices—that the doctors have a very minimal presence at the institution, they don't seem to do much.

WANG: I wasn't deliberating avoiding their presence. The doctors are present mostly at meal times—they have three meals a day—and they also have two medication times, and sometimes they'll have visits. But those are the times the doctors actually have a presence.

NOTEBOOK: It seems more like a prison in the sense of the doctors monitoring things than a hospital where they are treating people. There is very little “treatment” and no evaluations shown.

WANG: There's a little bit of that impression, there, but they are treating them. They are trying to treat them by medication. But as we all know, mental illness is very complex and the way treatments are nowadays are still very limited. The complexity of the illness and the rather limited ways to treat it do not make it likely to cure them. So, yes, the institution has a feeling that is sort of a “shelter” of some kind.

NOTEBOOK: I would imagine, since the range in types of patients is rather high and not everyone there has a mental illness, some are just troubled, that instead of treating them radically different as individuals with individual problems, it's easier to treat them all the same.

WANG: Yeah, they do not separate their patients. They do not manage and treat them differently. But I think it's because this particular institution doesn't have the ability to do it.

NOTEBOOK: Nor any available space...

WANG: Space, funding, various things. They have very limited everything.

NOTEBOOK: So are the administration of the hospital hoping the film will serve an activist purpose and draw attention to their own problems?

WANG: Of course there's that.

NOTEBOOK: Was the structure of the film, following around individual characters, an idea you started with, or developed from editing the footage?

WANG: That was a choice made early on during filming.

NOTEBOOK: I got the sense there was no private space in the hospital. Everyone's on view and has access to everyone. Eating, sleeping, going to the bathroom: nothing is private there.

WANG: That's right.

NOTEBOOK: Why was the film limited to the one floor, the top floor, the men's floor, I guess (the others being a women's floor and one other one I couldn't identify).

WANG: Because it's not easy to go to the second floor, the female section, as a male person, the access was difficult.

NOTEBOOK: The limitation was interesting because you could only stay on that top floor, the film never leaves that space, the camera almost feels like a member of the community. A combination of the length of the film, the camera's attitude, and the limitations of the space meant that it doesn't feel like the camera is following people around, but rather is, like everyone else, just watching people.

WANG: Yes, so you feel like you are one of them. You are in there.

NOTEBOOK: Was the camera and crew an invasive presence for the patients?

WANG: There was just two people, me and the photographer. Just the two of us, and sometimes just the one of us filming, so I might be in a different room and he would be filming, and I would tell him what to film. Sometimes it would be me filming and he would be resting somewhere. So that doesn't actually create a lot of presence, because it was so few people.

NOTEBOOK: Did you ever get the sense the patients were performing for the camera, showing off or acting up?

WANG: The first three days, yes. But then afterward there was none of it.

NOTEBOOK: What was your working process like, determining what to shoot? Would you sit in a room for a while waiting for something to happen, or would you wander around looking for things?

WANG: We were basically filming continuously, because of the time. We were on location for 72 days, and of those days we filmed during 60 of them. We had very limited access so once I was there I was filming continuously. Actually, of the 60 days, there were 15 days filmed outside. So actually inside the institution was about 45 days. So during that 45 days we did 250 hours of shooting, so we have that much footage. You can then calculate we filmed about 5 hours each day. We actually spent about 7 or 8 hours each day inside the institution. During that time most of our time was spent filming. In order to get 5+ hours of filming you basically have to be continuously filming during those 7 or 8 hours there. To me, each hour that I'm there is very precious. How I felt was that, okay we might have a very smooth process today, we got everything done, but we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, whether we're going to be allowed to do, so I was really trying to do as much as I could each day.

NOTEBOOK: I feel like the access is so rare, you would want to shoot everything, consume everything—maybe even without planning—and then find a shape for it later.

WANG: If you do that then you really would ruin the film! Because that would be a news report. To do a film you are supposed to portray a character, so you really have to get into the character. So even though the time of it was very limited, it just meant you have to get into the character that much more quickly.

NOTEBOOK: Do you mean the “character” of the film, or the characters, the people, in the film?

WANG: The characters of the people.

NOTEBOOK: I would assume you'd have to be thinking very fast, with such limited access. Did you do preparation work before shooting to get to know the people or did you have to discover their stories as you shot them?

WANG: We actually had to decide and learn for about a week at the beginning. After a week we've pretty much decided which characters we wanted to follow.

NOTEBOOK: Did you always want to include a section that left the hospital?

WANG: Yes. We followed four characters leaving the institution and chose to leave that one in.

NOTEBOOK: The hospital seems a genuine community, people are accepting and supportive of each other. There's not much patient fighting or self-imposed isolation.

WANG: There are some people, because of their mental state, or mental illness, that would not want to socialize, so at the beginning there were people standing alone in the corridor. So there are people like that. But most of them are not like that, most are acting like normal people in a normal Chinese culture, which is very much that they feel like they are in a group and have that group behavior and spirit.

NOTEBOOK: I was shocked at the end by the title card revealing the spectrum of inmates at the hospital, since I had assumed all that we were seeing were mentally unstable people. But that card reveals some are genuinely sick and some are genuinely healthy. In the film itself it's very hard to distinguish between those two kinds of patients.

WANG: Some people there are quite normal.

NOTEBOOK: I was also shocked, throughout, that some families apparently had to financially support this incarceration of family members. That they had to pay something like room and board, or hospital fees. That it wasn't a State supported.

WANG: That depends. If it was the family member who had tried to commit a person, then the family has to pay. But if it's some government institution or some government branch that put this person in there, then the Civil Administrative Bureau of the government would pay for it.

NOTEBOOK: In a line of dialogue from the family of the guy who was released they say something about him coming back after his allotted leave, that the family was having the hospital hold his spot for him, that despite how this hospital looks, access to it might be a luxury for some families.

WANG: There are other mental institutions in the area, and their conditions are similar. In any event, this particular person was not able to go back anyway.

NOTEBOOK: So the conditions we see here aren't unusual or specific to this particular hospital?

WANG: This is a pretty average condition. In China there are two types of hospitals: one is strictly a hospital, so there the focus is on treatment. That is a hospital-hospital. Then there is the other one, which is administrated by the Civil Administrative Bureau. That is also a treatment center, but is also has the ingredients of a shelter.

NOTEBOOK: Is the hospital-hospital also for mental health? Not an asylum but a regular hospital for treatment of mental illness.

WANG: The hospital-hospital, that is administrated by the Administrator of Public Health, are different. There *are* ones that are strictly mental health hospitals, and there are ones that are general hospitals with a mental health department.

NOTEBOOK: So why are these people in the one administered by the Civil department and not the Public Health department?

WANG: There is an “old system, new system” ingredient in it. The ones run by the Administrative Bureau, those are the older version.

Then, later on, when there was more focus on mental illness, then hospitals had more mental illness departments and they would have wards for mental illness patients. So this one is more an older-earlier establishment.

NOTEBOOK: I was curious about the sexual activity portrayed in the film. Because of the lack of privacy there seems to be a level of tenderness and human contact, both heterosexual and homosexual, that verges on sex. I was wondering if that was very present around you.

WANG: Yes, because I'm not trying to avoid that. If it's there, I will shoot it.

NOTEBOOK: Were people were actually able to engage in sexual activity, or if they had to maintain a certain distance due to community scrutiny?

WANG: It's a very different environment there, so what is restricting us now, and what are behavioral norms, no longer apply. The boundaries are not there any more. So in terms of sexuality, that's actually quite normal. People no longer think of it as something to moralize. So they are really more thinking about need. Some people there, there will be two people who will sleep together and they will sleep together each and every night for many years.

NOTEBOOK: Do you see this place more as a prison or as a hospital?

WANG: That I can't say. I do think of it as a hospital. It's not a regular prison, but it is a place that is very restricted. Society still doesn't have a way to appropriately deal with these people.

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Wang Bing: Filming A Land in Flux

Interview | Issue 82, July – August 2013

NEW LEFT REVIEW

Could you tell us about your childhood and family background?

When I was born in 1967, our family was half in the city and half in the countryside. My parents had left their respective villages in Shaanxi Province in the 1950s, both moving to the provincial capital, Xi'an. The early 1960s were the famine years, following the Great Leap Forward, and to reduce pressure on supplies, city-dwellers had been urged to move back to the countryside. By that time my father was studying in college, so it was my mother who left, though we three children were all born in Xi'an; my sister is two years older than me, my brother four years younger. By the time I was born, the Cultural Revolution had already started. Everybody advised—and my father agreed—that cities were too chaotic to be safe, plus it would be more convenient looking after little children in their home village. So after we were born, my mother always brought us back to the countryside. We all attended schools in rural areas.

My parents were from two different counties. Initially, we all stayed with my mother. When I was six, my paternal grandmother passed away. My parents couldn't offer much daily help to my grandfather over there, so they decided to send me to keep him company. I stayed with my grandfather for several years on my own, without my sister or brother. Both my elementary school and junior high school were where my grandfather lived. But actually, it was an intermittent separation; I would go back to my mother's from time to time. It was as if I had two homes for those years.

What was life in the two villages like? Was kinship very important culturally?

Both my parents came from the central region of Shaanxi Province, which had well-cultivated land and a rich agricultural tradition. Historically its development was much better than the southern or the northern parts of the province. My mother's home was in Jingyang County, about 80 kilometers east of Xi'an; transportation wasn't bad, with direct bus services to the city. The village had some sixty households. My father's home was in a village not far south of Xi'an, in Zhouzhi County, in the foothills of the Qinling Mountains. That village is very big for Shaanxi, with a population of 20,000 by the 1970s —much larger than my mother's family village. The two cultures were very different. To be sure, there were common features and, yes, some kinship factors, but primarily, life in this central Shaanxi region, Guanzhong, is relatively leisured. It is quite unlike the lifestyle in other parts of inland China, such as the provinces of Henan, Shanxi or Hebei. I have had the chance to visit the countryside there on numerous occasions, and I could always sense the difference. Comparatively speaking, people from our Shaanxi are more conservative. In my view this cultural conservatism is mainly due to the fact that Shaanxi did not get embroiled in the wars of China's modern period.

When did you start your college studies?

I was in junior high school in 1978 and 1979, but I didn't go to college until 1991, a whole decade later, due to family reasons. My father had studied civil engineering in Xi'an and had already graduated and been assigned a job at the provincial construction-design studio before the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. He stayed there all the time I was living with my grandfather and attending school in the village. Then, in 1981, my father was accidentally killed by gas poisoning. At that time the policy was that the deceased worker's child could fill the

the employment vacancy, so I took up the position in the design studio and started work with a formal job. I was only fourteen. To begin with I was put in the 'rear supply' department, doing all kinds of chores. But the only thing that really mattered to me was to be able to study. In the dormitory where the unmarried employees lived, the young people all became good friends. We ate together and played together. Many of the others were college graduates, arriving every year once the universities reopened after the Cultural Revolution. From the 1977 class all the way to 1986, the design studio absorbed some of the province's top-ranked students. Many of them were intellectually gifted. They all knew their art history by heart. This was the 1980s; for most people, it was a restless period—everyone had expectations, hopes for the future, for careers, personal life, and so on. That was what the 80s were like. But, in my view, it was also a rather banal period.

I became very interested in the arts while I was at the studio. A wide range of projects were undertaken there, drawing on different disciplines, of which architecture was the closest to art. At the same time, architecture is the most practical of the art forms; it is the combination of art and utility—so people trained in architecture tend to lean either towards artistic or practical directions. But studying architecture gives people unique strengths compared to art-school or film-school training. Students at art school tend to have special talents in one area or another, but they are usually not so well informed or good at conceptual thinking. It is very different for architecture students, who have to study mathematics and other science courses, and as a result, think and argue very logically. Relatively speaking, they are much stronger in intellectual terms.

Did you think about studying architecture at the time, or civil engineering?

I never thought of majoring in civil engineering. I initially thought about architecture. I worked very hard to prepare for the college entrance exams—by 1984, I was working mostly on preparing for the special tests for architecture. But then I took up photography in 1986 or 87. I also took up painting, in about 1988.

How did you turn to photography?

At the beginning it was mainly due to curiosity, but it was also because I had to decide on a major for my college studies. Architecture had very rigorous entry requirements at the time, so I thought about the fine arts. My friends at the studio all had basic training in painting, so I learned from them and painted together with them, which helped me prepare for art school. But it was highly competitive, getting into a fine-art course, and what I had learned in the studio was far from enough. For me, photography became the only route. Plus I'd already had a camera for several years and had been practising before I started painting. Though I hadn't published any of my photos, I had gathered enough experience. In 1991 I entered the Lu Xun Arts Academy in Shenyang, in the northeast, majoring in photography.

So you studied photography. When did your attention turn to cinema?

I was already thinking about changing to film in my second year at art college. I started buying books on film and doing the preparatory work. In my last year, before graduation, I went to visit the Beijing Film Academy and asked at the cinematography department whether I could enroll in the short-term training programme there. They said yes. They were very nice to me, since I was coming from a very good course. Actually, a year before my graduation from Lu Xun Arts Academy, I had already decided that, instead of going into the job market, I would continue my studies, which is what I did. After graduation, I carried on taking classes in Beijing, still working with a camera, but now in cinematography.

How long did you study at the Beijing Film Academy?

The training programme was initially for one year, but I stayed on for another. There were many classmates, and I also made many friends. But the main difference between us was our backgrounds; most of them were there on temporary leave from their formal jobs, whereas I was a new graduate from a formal art school. Our previous learning experiences were different, in terms of basic training. Most of them had not been through rigorous formal study.

Photography is still, while cinematography is in motion. Did you have to pass through a familiarization process between the two?

Photography as a form of visual art has its own properties and characteristics. Many people maintain a lifelong engagement with it. I used to spend day after day in the darkroom when I was a student in Shenyang and gained some understanding of the form and working process. However, personally, I was not particularly attracted by the seizing of a given moment; for me, the moving image was far more interesting. It provided a unique way to enter the reality of our time, to present the many facets of human life in a holistic way.

As for familiarization, it is after all a question of material, whatever form you are engaged in. For example, for a journalist engaged in writing, familiarity with language is a must. For me, in both photography and cinematography, the basic language is the image. Of course, I did not have a thorough acquaintance with the moving image when I first got to Beijing Film Academy. But it was a question of turning quantitative accumulation into qualitative transformation. Learning became something in one's own hands. In fact, after spending a couple of years getting into the field, film school would stop offering real solutions.

From joining the design studio, aged fourteen, to entering college, aged twenty-four, you had a whole decade to learn about the arts from various perspectives. Were you aware of the difference between East and West at the time?

I was not conscious of it before I went to Shenyang. In the 80s, the things I learned and books I read were all European—and there, classical architectural history is not divided from the other aspects of art history. Architectural projects involved painters, sculptors and other artists working together; it was not divided into different professions. There was no stand-alone architectural history in the past. We have to view architecture as part of art history—a very long history, inclusive of all kinds of art forms. For me, awareness of 'East' and 'West' came after I went to college, when I started to understand Chinese traditions. After I turned to film, I paid much more attention to this issue.

Did you see many films? Which ones had a particular influence on you?

We watched a lot of films, every day, of all different genres. But I couldn't help noticing that, though the history of cinema appears to be very rich, it is also quite simple. That is to say, at first sight, you would see many different filmmakers, different schools and national traditions. However, going over the field in a systematic fashion, you could get a relatively comprehensive understanding, an overall picture of it.

Art history is very long, while film history is quite short. With a history of just over a hundred years, cinema is not an old form. Plus, not long after motion pictures came into being, the form had already permeated the culture of people's daily life. In Europe and America, starting from the 1930s and lasting all the way to the 1970s, cinema reached the peak of its influence, as a vital part of cultural life. Various schools and traditions emerged—American, French, Italian, German and Soviet Russian —each formed by its respective environment and social context. Cinema has its own functions and requirements in each society. For

example, film in Soviet Russia went on to become a propaganda instrument, whereas in the United States it quickly turned to serving commercial interests. From the beginning, experimentation and explorations differed from one country to another; the directions taken by cinematic innovation—both formal artistic features and technical advances—relates to the local socio-cultural history.

It was not just about camera work. From the start, our interest was in grasping the whole, instead of particular aspects that had been singled out. The first year was really learning about cinema—about its history, its contemporary development, and its various national traditions. In short, the aim was a comprehensive understanding of film. After working in this way for a whole year, we were able to give a basic summary and evaluation whenever we saw a film. A kind of foundational direction in filmmaking was gradually clarified.

At the time you turned to filmmaking in the mid-90s, Chinese directors were enjoying rising international recognition. Was your own thinking influenced by the Chinese cinema of those years?

No, I didn't pay much attention to that. I don't much like those films. It is not to say I dislike an individual filmmaker. In fact, although some Chinese films had been winning international prizes since the 1980s, they are culturally still quite barren, lacking in the richness and unpredictability that are characteristic of world-class art. Modern art involves a broadened understanding of life, but I don't think those films have such a spirit. The reason? In addition to the problem of cultural markers or signposting, it is mainly—in my view—a question of continuing filmmaking within the establishment of the PRC.

Does this mean you also saw a lot of films from the early half of the twentieth century and you view contemporary films in connection to this past?

Oh, yes, we saw all the films. Once you are in the field, this is your life and you ought to know them. I've always done this—I still watch films every day. This is part of your life as a filmmaker. As for China's cinema history, when film arrived in China, it was like a seed landing on the soil. It made contact with the people living in this land and they, too, formed their perceptions about it. The Chinese did not take cinema as representing a new civilization, nor did they consider it as another cultural form. If you study the situation, you realize that, for Chinese people at the time, cinema was not much more than a plaything. It mainly took the fancy of some rich people, who found this new toy quite fascinating. What we have from the early days are shots of random juggling or stage performances. It is not like what happened in Europe. For example, in France, film grew into a new civilization, a very strong cinematic civilization—very different from China's case.

This is how localization worked initially. But Chinese cinema underwent many metamorphoses over time, taking in influences from American, European and Japanese films. The Chinese started to realize that it was not merely a new toy to play with, that it pointed to a new kind of culture. Yet this was also a period when China itself was changing very rapidly; developments in politics and economy accompanied the history of its cinema. Nowadays conventional formulations would characterize this period as 'leftist cinema'. But in my view, it could hardly be defined as such. The cinema that developed in Shanghai before 1949 was the most brilliant period in Chinese film history. Watching the films carefully, you can detect a mixture of ideologies behind the scenes, far from the versions in our textbooks. It should be easy for us to consider this period with a calm and reasoned eye, since it is now a historical question. For me, there are three factors at play in the films from this period. There are the works influenced by the international Communist movement; then there are the commercial- and star-centred productions, modelled on Hollywood; finally there are the

ones based on China's own intellectual tradition. Watching a film, you can find some elements of Communist ideology, some expressions of traditional literati morality, and at the same time the dominant star-system at work. Some films appear to be urban avant-garde, and some have traces of French or Italian realism. In fact, most of the films are a mixture. Their different styles are often due to the varied backgrounds of each director.

Most Chinese filmmakers and commentators do not seem to care very much about national cinema history.

I think this is a big problem in China. European scholars discuss Chinese cinema from time to time, but with their limited understanding of Chinese society, they couldn't undertake detailed studies, even if they offer interesting opinions. In contrast, they would invest huge amounts of time and energy in studying the cinema of their own country in the context of its immediate cultural-historical background. The history of national cinema emerges from that type of study. But there is no equivalent work in China. There is a lack of effort—judicious, clarifying, rational effort—in constructing our own history of cinema. Of course we need to understand the history of world cinema and that of other countries. But what is more important is to have a clear view of your own country's film history, as well as contemporary filmmaking and the socio-cultural order of your own country. What is the nature of film within our overall cultural context today? What is the actual state of cinema right now? As a filmmaker, one has to have the patience to reach a certain self-understanding. This is my view.

You returned to the northeast, to Shenyang, at the end of the 90s and started shooting *West of the Tracks* (2003), your epic documentary on the destruction of the rust-belt industrial district there. How did you decide on that theme?

I spent more than three years in Beijing, sometimes working on television series or as a cameraman. Then I decided to shoot West of the Tracks. I already knew the industrial district of Tiexi very well. When I was a college student in Shenyang, I often went there to photograph at weekends. Its factories, its workers and residents—I became familiar with the place. On the other hand, the decision also came from a perception about our time: there was a feeling of desolation that reminded me of Tiexi District—the sense that a history which used to be important was now slowly declining, dissolving in front of our eyes. Thereafter, my question was how to tell a relatively coherent story with such a theme and so many characters.

It involved confronting the factory complex, its routine of production and human life?

Yes, of course. Having decided on a theme, each filmmaker will then choose different technical approaches. In practice you consider how to deploy your own technical devices to make it viable and that's all. Many people asked me why my first film is nine hours long. But there are no particular secrets. It's nothing special for me, personally. I don't feel anything particular even today.

But didn't you anticipate resistance from your audience? And what were the main problems in making the film?

Resistance? I never thought about such things. If you want to make a film, you have to work on it, to realize your plan from start to finish. For me, my job is to get things done. It didn't involve much exploration of the language of presentation and representation. It was mainly the actual work, practical matters on a daily basis. I didn't have much difficulty getting into the factories, making friends with workers, and so on. That was all quite simple. The most difficult part of filmmaking is money. You need to shoot every day, to manage a mass of details every day. The work required a continuous input of material resources. Basically my friends and my family supported me.

But even so, you still didn't take potential audience resistance into account?

Eh? The cost of a film is a different matter from its box-office returns. It's not related to that. I don't think about the box office while making my films. That's not to dismiss it completely, but the two are not intertwined. When you want to make a film, it is not because you expect an economic profit from it. I am not saying this to defend the purity of 'art'. The main point is, the two are not related directly to each other. You are working on a project. It is obviously not going to make a big profit. Yet, if you believe it is an important thing to do, then you should go and work on it. It is not something decided by economic considerations.

Later on, you made two more documentaries, *Crude Oil* (2008) and *Coal, Money* (2010), which seem to continue the theme of *West of the Tracks*. *Crude Oil* lasts for fourteen hours, recording a group of workers at an oil field in the wilderness of China's northwest Qinghai Province during a cold winter. The screening of the film in Los Angeles was in an exhibition space where the audience could walk in or stray out randomly. In fact, rarely did anyone sit there through the whole screening. It is like a work of installation art. Was that intentional?

Yes, it was. It was for the Rotterdam Film Festival. People there wanted to have a section of installation cinema. They came to ask me and I accepted their invitation. It was specially made for the purpose. It did not come with much money. As I was working in the northwest at the time, for convenience's sake, I decided to shoot the oil field.

These three films are all related to heavy industry or the energy industry. However, in *Crude Oil* there is little conversation or action, either inside the workers' lounge or outside by the rig. The monolithic impression of the film is not interrupted even when they do speak or move around, an effect further reinforced by the long shots typically lasting for a few minutes. It is quite different from *West of the Tracks*, where the viewer has a strong sense of lived life, a previously existing community, as well as the bond to a collective. Is the contrast due to the difference in locations?

No, it's not. This is the changing China. Factories of the past still had a collective spirit. Workers' lives were related to the factories. For instance, if you were a formal worker here, you would be considered part of the ownership of the workplace. Likewise, people's daily life was closely related to their work relation at the factory. That is no longer the case for production units today—now there is a contract-labour system everywhere. It is a simple relationship of hiring, often temporary. The oil fields are no exception. In China today, apart from civil servants, everyone is on the contract system. The workplace is no longer intrinsically related to your life.

Therefore, the workers in *Crude Oil* may have their contracts coming to an end, either this year or next?

That's because of the actual relations of production today. The system has changed, not only in terms of economic relations at the workplace, but that of the whole society as well. When a company decides to hire you, it could be for two months, three months, a year, or three years; and it will pay you according to how much you work. The film itself documents this. We did not set out to exaggerate or diminish the situation. You can form your own judgement after viewing it, but that comes afterwards from you as a viewer; it's not our intention.

In *Coal, Money*, you followed the truck that transported coal from Shanxi Province to the port city of Tianjin, to catch sight of how people, from near the coal mine to those along the road, were

trying to seize opportunities to change the coal passing through their hands into money. Does this also aim to capture the new times from a slice of our social reality?

The film *Coal, Money* is an incomplete project. We shot a lot at the time. But it was done for a television programme in Europe, which only gave me a fifty-minute slot. The producer, a French company, actually understood the problem. They asked me to make a complete version afterwards, but I didn't have time to go back and work on it again. Within the fifty minutes, it wasn't easy to narrate a coherent story. It is not a completed work.

Would you agree that compared to your longer works, the people in this film are much more lively, often proactive?

That's right. It is the changing nature of our time. We can see that China today is not exactly the same as it was in the years when I shot *West of the Tracks*. Nowadays, you can see the hardship in people's lives, but there is also creativity, energy and vigour among ordinary people. You can see that, under the unfavourable conditions of a backward economy, simple production methods and the constraints of the system, the ordinary people are working hard to create wealth through their own labour. It is the flow of life in our time.

Chronologically, your next work after *West of the Tracks* was *He Fengming* (2006). Thematically, this work is related to your feature film *The Ditch* (2010). Both are about the labour camp, Farm Jiabiangou, in northwest China. The camp was set up to hold the 'Rightists' in 1957 and closed down when most of the 3,000-plus prisoners there starved to death during the Great Famine of 1958–60. By the time the government ordered all the detainees to go home in early 1961, only a few hundred still survived. Isn't this a very different topic from the films we have just discussed?

In fact, I turned to the story of Jiabiangou as early as 2004, right after *West of the Tracks*. I was drafting the script and planning things at the same time as making *Crude Oil* and *Coal, Money*. My main focus was always on Jiabiangou. It took me seven years to get *He Fengming* and *The Ditch* done. The other films were, in a way, by-products that I did in my spare time.

Why did you choose this topic and spend so much energy on it?

I first learned about the camp from Yang Xianhui's book, Stories from Jiabiangou. I was shocked. I managed to contact him afterwards. Meanwhile, I went out to collect more materials, do my reading, and conduct interviews. In 2005, Yang Xianhui introduced me to *He Fengming*. That was when I made the documentary about her.

It is obvious to me that Jiabiangou occupies a critical position in China's modern history. For one thing, the international Communist movement was introduced to China almost a century ago. During this whole period its ideology has had a major impact on the people of this country, bringing about tremendous transformations as well as causing sharp conflicts in people's lives. Jiabiangou itself did not last very long, but it harbours singular significance in our modern history. The camp is very important for us in understanding our own past.

In your documentary, He Fengming tells her own life story. When the PRC was established in 1949, she was an enthusiastic high-school student eager to participate in the Revolution. Less than ten years later, both she and her husband were labelled 'Rightists' and sent to separate labour camps. When her husband starved to death at Jiabiangou, she was not even able to pay him a last visit. To protect her children and herself during the Cultural Revolution, she

destroyed all written records from the earlier years. But she never gave up her effort to recover their shared memory. Eventually, she was able to publish her memoir in the 21st century. Your film starts by following He Fengming walking through the snow to her home. But thereafter, the camera never moves. It is not exactly in interview form either, for the film does not record any interviewer's questions. The whole film is basically He Fengming sitting in her chair, speaking to the camera to tell her story, with only a few moments of exception, such as when she stands up to turn on the lights. Was this intentional?

Indeed, it was planned in advance. It was decided when we first met with He Fengming. We wanted to make it like that. The actual shooting went on much longer, of course, but the format was the same. I don't usually worry about whether the audience will accept the way my film is designed. You are the filmmaker; it is your job to make a convincing work. Instead of worrying about the audience, you should search for ways to make your film a good one. To me, it means to look for, or create, a potentially better cinema that fits your needs in making this particular work. At the same time, your film must be capable of accommodating the living reality of its subject.

Your camera is fixed at quite a distance from He Fengming. Didn't you consider giving her a few close-ups? Or was it that you didn't want the camera itself to catch the interviewee's attention?

I don't think these are problems. Filmmaking can deploy various tactics: close-up or long shot; camera in view or hidden; conscious performance or spontaneous reaction. These are not important issues. The key is your choice. The technique and style you choose for a film should be appropriate to your subject matter. What is really important is to establish a relation between the subject of your film and your audience. It is the camera that creates this connection. For me, the main concern about this relationship in shooting *He Fengming* was to make it low-key —to leave it unnoticed, or maybe even banal. But shooting such a film means establishing a connection not just to each story, each character, but to history. In fact, it was a social phenomenon at the time; many people who had lived through that period wanted to write their memoirs and tell their stories. Why? Because our mainstream culture, the dominant ideology, does not offer them an identity through which they could recognize their own lives across the passage of time.

Another question I have been repeatedly asked is why people should trust the old lady's account. For me, this has never been an issue. I assume she is trustworthy and that is all. A big problem in our social life is the weakening of human relations: from major events to daily contacts our society has evolved into an environment where people do not feel they can trust each other. But this wouldn't work for me. I don't approach people with suspicion. No, I needed to establish a relation of trust with her. There was no reason for me not to trust her. Moreover, why couldn't we simply listen to her? At least, we could learn about another human being, about how she lived her life.

In that case, why did you decide to make a feature film of the same story, with *The Ditch*?

As I mentioned earlier, I believe Camp Jiabiangou has a significance for modern Chinese history—while as history it is part of the past, no longer a living aspect of our present. But it was also a personal choice to make it as a feature film instead of a documentary. Though there are still pressures from various directions, we also have spaces and freedoms—it is a question of exploring possibilities. So, why shouldn't I try to make it as a feature film?

In the narrative processes of *He Fengming* and *The Ditch*, from screenplay to editing, how did you approach the conflicts between the lived experience of individuals and the ways in which historical events are presented?

I don't think I was impeded by such conflicts. What is important for me is, firstly, that you can accomplish things today through your own efforts, and also that it is possible to adopt a personal perspective when looking at historical events—and that I could do so through my filmmaking practice. This was an important factor in the whole shooting and production process of *The Ditch*. People are used to the kind of historical film that covers a long time span, weaves a complicated narrative and provides rich period atmosphere. But this was not my approach. I wanted to rethink how to view cinema and history, including how to handle time and narrative. I didn't try to present the story in its totality; what I included in the film is only a tiny part of the larger historical event. In this sense, *The Ditch* is quite simple. It might disappoint some viewers, but I feel quite satisfied with it.

***The Ditch* does not provide any information on the 'Anti-Rightist' Campaign of 1957, nor tell the viewer the origin of the labour camp. It covers only the last and worst days that the 'Rightists' spent at the camp in the winter of 1960. Similarly, it does not narrate the life stories of the central characters, apart from giving fragments of background information through casual dialogue. How then did you consider the question of time, in such a historical film?**

It is impossible for us to recover history today, but we can sense the existence of it. With a historical event, little pieces remain within people's memory. History exists in these scattered memories. Thus, my film consists of small parts. This part is on one character and that part is on another. One episode of this guy and then a different episode of another guy—they are all happening in the same place and within a month. These are all related, in symbiosis with each other, and the unity of time is shared by all. We did not try to build up the development of a character or a complete narrative. Nor could you say that Jiabiangou labour camp is the central character of the film—after all, *The Ditch* presents only a tiny part of Jiabiangou's history. It isn't aimed at giving the whole history of the camp and in any case, I didn't have the resources to do so on a large scale. But I could still shoot the small portion of the time that truly interested me, and through it, we may gain a glimpse of that historical period.

While making *The Ditch*, you also made another documentary, *Man with No Name* (2009). It appears to be about a new theme, isolation and solitude; yet it is also a human study. Was this intentional? Formally speaking, in contrast to He Fengming, which records a single person talking through the whole film, *Man with No Name* does not have any dialogue at all.

It was completely accidental that I stumbled into this man. We were taking a break from shooting *The Ditch* and a friend was driving me around the barren wilderness, when this man came out of nowhere. Somehow I was moved by the way he was living. I think he brought us the experience of his own life. We are living in a time of growing material desires, both individual and as a society. It is a time of hypertrophied desires. Then here is someone who might be the poorest, the loneliest, but also the simplest, someone on his own and pretty much self-sufficient. He lives alone in the wilderness, without contact with other people. He doesn't need to beg from others. His is a natural state, like grass sprouting in the spring and withering in the autumn. In the process you could see a human's experience of living at its most basic. It was this that touched me.

While shooting *He Fengming*, I was indeed curious to explore the extent to which language could sustain a film. But the reason for using no dialogue in *Man with No Name* is rather simple. I asked the man if I could film him, but he would not reply. There was no communication at all. So we went on to film his state of existence.

The theme of basic survival also appears in your latest documentary, *Three Sisters*

(2012). Again, you encountered the three girls by chance. You've said elsewhere that you met them when you went to mourn a writer in a remote area of southwest Yunnan Province. How did you become friends with him?

The writer's name is Sun Shixiang. Actually, I did not know him personally before he passed away in 2001, at the very young age of 31. He and I belong to the same generation. He is best known for his novel Shenshi (Story of God), a fictionalized memoir of his own life story, starting from his childhood and published posthumously in 2004. The novel is more than a million characters long. It is rich with all the aspects of human life Sun Shixiang witnessed. In addition to his own story, he tells those of his parents, grandparents, neighbours, relatives. I think he shares the same worldview as me. Moreover, I feel that I, too, have lived the kind of life he tells in his novel. He has effectively told the life story of our generation, from childhood to maturity. It is a lived, sensuous experience as well as a spiritual one. I am not a writer or a literary critic, but I think Shenshi is one of the few really excellent novels in contemporary China. I read a lot of contemporary literature, but many of the works are far removed from our life. I don't mean personal lives: it is the life that our people are actually going through in this historical period, this national social process. Most works are unable to express this lived collective experience, which is intense but often rich and powerful. To me, these works are simply too naive. I read Sun Shixiang's novel quite early on, while working on *The Ditch*. I knew he'd passed away, but I had always wanted to visit his home, to see his parents and his family. I was busy with shooting at the time and was only able to make the trip after *The Ditch* was done. For me, it was also to visit his tomb and pay my respects to him.

How did you meet the three little sisters there? As your film shows, they are living mainly by themselves, without parents to take care of them.

Sun Shixiang's tomb is on a high mountainside. On our way back downhill, we happened to pass this village. We stopped our car there and saw the three children by the road. This was three years ago, when the eldest sister Yingying was seven and not yet going to school. By the time I started shooting, Yingying was ten, and the two younger girls were about six and four. I started chatting with them, and they took me back to their home and cooked some potatoes for me. It's like that in the countryside. I am used to the ways of village life; they don't feel strange or alien. I don't feel intimidated or hesitant about going to a stranger's home in a village. It isn't a big deal for me.

Did the life the three children were living remind you of your own childhood?

When I was growing up in the 1970s, life was still very poor in China. Everywhere, across the whole country, people didn't have enough food to eat or clothes to wear. Of course this kind of material poverty left deep impressions in our memory, with many details. Since the 80s the country has basically been on the path away from this poverty-laden state. From the 90s on, problems of this sort have gradually been put behind us. Therefore to a certain extent poverty for us is a question of memory. Then when you come to this mountainous region, all of a sudden you're confronted by the same poverty, right in your face.

It is true there was general poverty throughout the country in the 1970s, but wouldn't you say it is a new phenomenon for parents to leave such small children behind to fend for themselves?

Yes, this is a new phenomenon, occurring in a period quite different from the past. This is not to say that people always used to live a happy family life. Instead, it was primarily

a state with a high degree of certainty. People's private lives were restricted by society: you could not easily get a divorce, or go away and leave your family of your own free will. The problem was not merely the ideology: we could see that all our activities were controlled. In those days you couldn't daydream about leaving, if you no longer wanted to live with your wife or husband. It was actually impossible. You didn't have the freedom to search for your own personal life. Again, not that people were living very happily in those days. These are two different things.

These problems have emerged now, but this is not necessarily completely bad; to a large extent it is due to economic developments. In fact, with many people working hard their whole lives long, economic relations exert a powerful control over people's lives —much more powerful than the ideological control of the past. Why? It is simple: look at this small village, poor and remote—all the capable young workers have gone to search for employment elsewhere. You could say that the economy is worse—more horrifying: it exploits people by getting them to make the effort voluntarily, of their own free will.

***Three Sisters* lasts two and a half hours, with many long shots, mainly following the children's daily life, with limited dialogue and no voice-over at all. Yet the images were so powerful that, when we saw it at a packed theatre, the audience was transfixed from beginning to end. This suggests you have great confidence in the images' ability to connect with the audience?**

The film has two versions. One is 90 minutes long, made for a television programme. Usually films for television are about 50 minutes, so this is already quite long. The other version is for theatre and lasts for 150 minutes. As I said, a film establishes its connection to its audience through the camera. It is not that the images are necessarily very attractive or appealing. I think what matters is the manner in which the filmmaker works. When you keep on watching, when your attention is continuously trained on something, why is it that you want to look at it, and then to show it to your audience? There has to be something people care about, something that carries on growing. The inner richness of the girls' characters, all those details of their lives—these keep unfolding, offering the audience the chance to reflect on this increasing complexity. The children radiate kindness, instinctively. Even the younger one helps feed the pigs and goats. It is a very poignant, simple relationship between human and animal. Many things in this film are actually very simple, but it brings out the basic realistic side of human life and feeling, through the life and feeling of the children. A rich film is not an advertisement. It says something about human existence, about the basic things in our life. Three Sisters is set in a poverty-stricken environment, but the film as a whole is not about poverty, it is about the lived experience of the girls' existence.

As your film shows, the father of the three sisters who has gone to work in the city comes back to the village each year to plant potatoes, their main food supply.

Yes, and obviously, he has problems. This raises a new issue that has emerged with China's economic development: a huge number of villagers have moved to the cities, but although their labour has contributed enormously to the urban economy, their wages and their living standards remain low, and so the countryside becomes even poorer than before. After these young labourers have paid for their living expenses in the city, for food, lodging and so on, they have little left. When they return to the village they don't bring much back with them, after all their back-breaking labour. The girls' father is not old, but it's obvious he could

have lived a little better if he was on his own. With three children, he can't save anything in the city, so he has to come back.

In that case, the film is not about loneliness, either?

In *Three Sisters* there are invisible constraints. We haven't said anything about the children's mother, but she is not part of their daily life—the fact is, she has left the girls on their own for years. We only see their father, and a few other people around their home. But although they appear to be three lonely little figures, they actually live inside the economy of our times. The economy has kidnapped every one of us. In this sense, human relations today are essentially economic relations. The economy assigns the positions people occupy and continuously reinforces them. These positions, in turn, are often invisible.

Does this correspond to what we discussed about *Crude Oil* and *Coal, Money*?

Yes and what we see is actually an unspecified social relationship in China today.

Do you think that when children like the three sisters grow up, they will be longing for the cities too?

It is not that the child will be longing for the city, but that China's economy is centred in the cities. They are like magnets; it is not a question of personal will but economic relationships. Actually, it's not that China's economy was centred in the countryside in the past: for a very long time there have been deep distinctions between the rural economy, the urban economy and petty industry; but these different dimensions maintained a certain balance between them. Now heavyweight economic power is located in the cities, which have become centres of extraordinary wealth. People are drawn to this wealth to make a living, seeking opportunities. The magnet's energy determines the size of the regions it affects.

You once said that in China, only Shanghai has an urban culture; it doesn't exist elsewhere—Beijing's is essentially a political culture, for example. Now that the cities have become such magnets, will this lead to a growing urban culture? Or, alternatively, will culture be thwarted by the hukou residency registration system?

I don't think it will slow down the trend. That comment was made in a discussion on Chinese cinema. China as a nation was based on agrarian civilization; the social ideology of the majority today, at its core, is still within that frame. As to whether—or how—an urban culture might emerge when most of the population lives in cities, these are questions for a future time. But the cities will orient development, and cinema too can contribute towards urban culture. These changes are bound to come, bringing changes to all the other aspects of our life as well. It's not a question of whether I want it to change personally.

Does this mean you believe cinema has its own vitality?

It will change just like other things. Our world has become more and more dependent on the visual image, though we haven't given it much thought. In the past, images did not play such a crucial role, though we had a rich civilization based on the written word. Rules for composition, word games, narrative genres, descriptions of manners, all were components of a culture created by the application of the written word. The art of the moving image has a much shorter history, but it has expanded and changed at a very high speed. There are many possibilities for contemporary cinema; it will not be confined to what has been accumulated in our repertoires from the past century.

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Wang Bing “Experience and Poverty” at Magician Space, Beijing

Wang Bing and Francesco Tenaglia in conversation

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Wang Bing is one of the best-known Chinese filmmakers in the West. He is mainly active in documentary but also has worked in fiction, notably presenting The Ditch—a history of struggle, adversity, and death in the Jiabiangou forced labor camp in the Gobi Desert, where Chinese political dissidents were imprisoned in the 1960s—at the 2010 Venice Biennale.
Traces (2014) was conceived and realized during the production of this film, and it’s included in the exhibition Experience and Poverty at Magician Space gallery in Beijing, along with Mrs. Fang(winner of the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival, 2017), 15 Hours (presented at documenta 14), and a photographic series.

Francesco Tenaglia: Let’s begin with a few words about *Traces*.
Wang Bing: Prior to filming the work *Traces* in 2005, for a number of years I had been collecting a lot of 35mm film , which I hadn’t yet had the chance to use. It was when I was preparing to work on the feature film *The Ditch* that I decided to take this material and shoot the additional content that was eventually used for *Traces*. After shooting, it stayed in my studio unedited for a while. Later, in 2014, when I was invited to have a retrospective survey at the Centre Pompidou, I decided to use this material to make *Traces* into a completed video work.

FT*:* The curator Yang Beichen, with whom you worked on the exhibition, uses the word “detective” to describe your activity. Sometimes your corporeality is revealed by the sound of your breathing or your shadow entering the scene in this historically charged land. It seems like an empty, imposing, strangely beautiful desert that slowly ceases to be merely a natural presence and reveals an untold story.
WB: Yang Beichen is a very good friend whom I have known for many years now. I’m so grateful for his work in preparing and curating this exhibition. *Traces* begins in a quiet part of the Gobi Desert and slowly searches for the remains of bodies left exposed there through wind and rain after sixty years. It is an attempt to explore the suffering of starvation and death that had been that had been crushed by the history of this place.

FT: Do you think about the difference in the reception of your work in a movie theater environment versus a gallery space (where the visitor can enter when the film has already started, or not stay for the complete film, and so on)?
WB: Viewing a film inside a cinema is much more linear and fixed. The narrative starts with the beginning and then moves in a forward progression until the end. With an art exhibition, each audience member has a fluid relation to the presentation as soon as they enter into the space. It can be more fragmentary, and for the majority of cinema works this can bring about many obstacles. For my part, I am slowly trying to find out how video can be presented to suit the rhythm of an exhibition through both its narrative logic, but also the time of the narrative. I had all this in mind when I was producing my two new works for this year’s documenta. *Mrs. Fang* used a relatively conventional cinema method in its narrative. *15 Hours* uses a continuous shot, without any editing to structure the film’s narrative. The original

recorded footage is presented in its entirety in order to convey a truthful image to the viewer.

FT: *Mrs. Fang* and *15 Hours*—and probably this can be said of a large part of your work—share a form of disillusionment. You portray some passages of human life as inevitable, for instance the approach of death, or the hard work of people coming from the countryside to the city, in a very cold and concise way that seems to cancel space for illusions.
WB: The most fundamental aspect of the moving image is its ability to directly copy an action in order to show us the physical world. Moreover, this direct way of recording something happens to be a method of filmmaking that I particularly like. For me it holds the most creativity. It is also about finding a rational way to analyze things. Images possess an idea of truth that makes them (in the widest sense) inherently documentary; they also provide us a way to decipher the foundations of this truth.

FT: The exhibition at Magician Space also includes photographs. How do these pictures complement *Traces*, *15 Hours*, and *Mrs. Fang*?
WB: The photographs were also taken in 2014 for the Pompidou retrospective. Actually, it had been something like twenty years since I had taken a photograph and I am still not too skilled at it technically. I shot them in the middle of the night using a torch to shine light onto the subjects. There is a mysterious quality to the wrinkles and textures we see. It was as if standing in the middle of the Gobi Desert, illuminated by the nighttime stars, gave me an unbounded possibility to imagine the narratives behind the remnants of these departed people.

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