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Film review

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***Dead Souls* (Si Linghun 死靈魂).**
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JUDITH PERNIN

Wang Bing's latest documentary is an oral history of the anti-rightist movement (1957) retold half a century later by former prisoners of a re-education through labour camp in Gansu Province. Filmed over 12 years in between other projects, it is an achievement for Wang Bing as a filmmaker, as well as a notable contribution to the understanding of the early Mao era. Indeed, *Dead Souls* is a collection of testimonies of survivors from a series of brutal political campaigns launched from the late 1950s onwards, whose experience is still not fully acknowledged in official history. The toll of the Hundred Flowers movement (1956), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), and the subsequent Great Famine (1959-1962) on the population still needs to be assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively, as many of the victims have remained unaccounted for or have been silenced. Hence, the narratives in *Dead Souls* form a remarkable trove of information and personal memories useful to the general public, as well as to historians and experts.

While *Dead Souls'* long duration and investigative approach could suggest that the film serves a mainly archival purpose, its production, filmic approach, and narrative mode reveal the point of view of an author. As an independent filmmaker, Wang Bing keeps away from the official Chinese film structures, relying instead on moderate funding from domestic and foreign production companies, as well as on commercial distribution abroad. He is recognised on the international film scene as one of the major documentary filmmakers of his time, and in China, he occupies a distinctive seat in independent cinema circles, at once revered and envied by his peers. Unlike many of them, he has managed to produce within two decades a dozen documentaries and one fictional work, all selected in major festivals. He has been the focus of countless publications, and is celebrated in retrospectives and exhibitions around the world, despite the fact that his films are challenging to any audience because of their duration, raw observational style, and difficult topics. *Dead Souls* is probably one of the most complex of them all, and it would be impossible to sum up the film in a few pages. The following is an introduction to *Dead Souls* that aims at relocating it in Wang Bing's career to unveil its specificity and connection to the rest of his oeuvre.

Over his two-decade career, Wang Bing has filmed a diversity of topics. He became famous for *West of the Tracks* (Tiexiqu 鐵西區, 2003), a nine-

hour long documentary depicting the decomposition of an industrial zone that represented the end of the socialist era. In *Man With No Name* (無名者, 2010), he recorded a quiet old vagrant's existence in his isolated subterranean dwelling. *Three Sisters* (三姊妹, 2012) offered a contemplative look at the daily life of three melancholy young girls "left behind" in the Yunnan mountains, while *Til Death Do Us Part* (瘋愛, 2013) explored a psychiatric hospital, and *Ta'ang* (德昂, 2016) followed the forced migration of a group of refugees at the border of China and Burma. Most of these films draw our attention to minute and seemingly mundane details of the protagonists' actions by descriptive shots of unusually long duration. While Wang Bing favours silence and stillness in *Three Sisters* and *Man with No Name*, parts of *West of the Tracks*, *Ta'ang*, and *Til Death Do Us Part* include lively dialogues, and his historical films such as *Fengming*, *A Chinese Memoir* (和鳳鳴, 2007), *The Ditch* (夾邊溝, 2010), and *Dead Souls* revolve entirely around the spoken word. The distinctive testimonial dispositive in the latter films brings into sharp focus the witnesses' historical experience and reveals by the same token the systematic and meticulous nature of Wang Bing's work. *Dead Souls* belongs to this series of historical films in which the protagonists' oral performance is at the centre of the narration, but its contemplative desert landscapes shot with a handheld camera also convey a degree of reflexivity found in his quieter films (*Three Sisters*, *Man With No Name*).

Although Wang Bing's style is unmistakably distinctive, he follows filming principles common to other Chinese independent documentary filmmakers at the turn of the century. From the 1990s onwards, several directors started to devise a set of practices that were new in China: observational filmmaking immersed in a given milieu over a long period of time, *xianchang* 現場 (or live, onsite) recording, generally excluding dramatic post-produced sound and visual editing techniques, expository commentary, and extra-diegetic music. Alongside this stylistic elaboration, they chose to focus on the blind spots of Chinese mainstream and official media, and Wang Bing's attraction to marginal people and unofficial and oral history fits in current trends of Chinese independent filmmaking. What sets him apart is a rigorous dispositive and long-lasting focus on the experiences of survivors of anti-rightist camps in Gansu Province, as they feature in his only fiction (*The Ditch*) and in two major documentaries (*Fengming* and *Dead Souls*). The latter, although newly released, was in the making during much of Wang Bing's career, and is best introduced as part of a wider project with aims that are at once documentary, archival, and fictional.

This trilogy was inspired by Yang Xianhui's 楊顯惠 *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夾邊溝記事, 2002), a collection of fictionalised testimonies of the experiences of rightists during the Great Famine that Wang Bing came across in 2004 and adapted in *The Ditch* in 2010. While writing this script, Wang Bing also conducted preparatory research. He read He Fengming's autobiography, recorded and edited his interview with her into a long feature documentary, and visited many other survivors, collecting 120 testimonies in 600 hours of recordings. This long-term project, complicated by the sensitivity of the subject matter, was only made possible thanks to the protagonists' active help and their network, as well as the director's intimate engagement with the topic. Indeed, despite its historical significance, *Dead Souls* is also a personal project. Wang Bing knew that two of his uncles

had been labelled rightists, but growing up, he had no idea of the scale and repercussions of the campaign.¹ When historical research is made difficult by enforced silence and the absence of accessible archives, only individual initiatives carried out under the radar and based on oral history manage to challenge mainstream and official narratives; this belief is behind the work of many *minjian* 民間 intellectuals, filmmakers, and artists, such as Wang Bing, Yang Xianhui, and some of the film's protagonists, who are part of a loose network of survivors or historical activists attempting to redress official narratives on the anti-rightist campaign, and commemorate its victims. Through research, autobiographies, and investigations, or in the case of Wang Bing, fiction and documentary films, they all strive to uncover personal experiences of the past.²

Dead Souls is composed of three parts – *Mingshui* 明水 1, 2, and 3, from the name of the camp that became a mass graveyard at the end of the Great Leap Forward. With a few exceptions, the documentary is edited according to the chronology of Wang Bing's investigation on-site in Gansu Province and his encounters with survivors and their families, some of whom are interviewed twice over the years. The interviews form a canvas onto which Wang Bing pins descriptive sequences – a visit to a former camp site, a walk in dunes scattered with bones and skulls, the anger of a son at his rightist's father's burial. Invariably, captions indicate the survivor's name, and the date and place of the interview at the outset of each segment. Wang Bing alternates between interviews and onsite sequences at the beginning and end of each part of *Dead Souls*, starting with an interview and ending with a long contemplative walk in the Mingshui dunes. All of this is conveyed with a certain dryness, akin to the climate where the film is taking place and on par with the sobering nature of the materials. But unlike in *Fengming*, where the testimonial dispositive did not accept any variation and presented itself as an almost continuous frontal shot of the witness, Wang Bing takes more liberty here. He changes angles and appears in the frame, and the gravity of the film is often broken by the protagonists' wittiness, their sense of humour, their tears, or the shocking revelations they make. The witnesses are people in their 70s and even 90s, usually filmed in their homes, speaking relatively close to the camera, sitting on a couch, on chairs, or lying in bed. Some of them have passed away since, as stated in captions stressing the urgency of recording their stories. Their relatives are seen in the background, sometimes quiet, other times addressing the interviewee, or passing in front of the camera. Part and parcel of the context of the recording, they are not edited out, for they reinforce the perceived authenticity of a testimony filmed in an ordinary family setting, almost undisturbed by the filmmaker's presence. This method is reminiscent of *Fengming*, in which Wang Bing was similarly careful to limit breaks into the continuity of the witness's testimony by cuts and dynamic camera movements usually seen in mainstream documentaries. However, in contrast with *Fengming*, which revolved around a single survivor, the protagonists here refer to each other throughout the film, whether they are siblings or spouses, whether they met in the camps, or after. This interlinking of oral narratives serves to validate their stories, and their accumulation expresses how usual, widespread, and systematic the anti-rightist campaign was.

The survivors often begin by revealing the reasons behind their rightist label, expressing their feeling of injustice through an absurd anecdote or a pointed criticism. They retrace their misfortunes to their family background, or tell us how they were denounced for openly criticising policies, or simply by betrayal or to fill quotas. They also talk about their writings, their ideology, or their faith, and debate the merits and failures of Maoism. But the main narrative lies elsewhere. As Wang Bing points out³, what the protagonists are

really telling us is how they survived. Some testimonies give ample details on strategies to flee from the camp, smuggle rice husks, find sustenance in tree bark, and lure their bodies into a semblance of satiation. Most of them managed to live because they could count on their families sending them food, because they had connections or good relations with cadres, or thanks to comradeship with fellow prisoners. Many were actually working as cooks in the canteen, or as farmers, which gave them direct access to food.

Some of the witnesses stand out, such as a female protagonist called Fan Peilin 范培琳, who closes the film with a particularly moving account of her family's endless political misfortunes from the 1950s onwards. Another is a former guard – Zhu Zhaonan 朱照南 – the only member of the camp administration, and a cook – interviewed by Wang Bing. Standing on the street of his village, he shows him a photograph. It is a picture of him cycling toward the camera and away from a group of prisoners. His testimony and the photograph somewhat break the otherwise homogeneous materials of the film, bringing into view a background for the survivors' oral testimonies. From then on, Wang Bing inserts a few archival documents such as letters and other portraits of prisoners as if to enhance the historical value of the oral accounts. Together, these narratives describe in great detail the inner workings of a re-education through labour camp, and the physical and psychological suffering of disenfranchised men trying to stay alive as their fellow inmates die one by one during the Great Leap Famine.

The survivors' efforts to remember, investigate, and rehabilitate the past is illustrated in other sequences, for instance when Wang Bing joins a group of witnesses on a visit to Mingshui, where they look for the remains of former prisoners and relatives in the sand. They find bones and pieces of structures reminiscent of the former camp, and discuss their attempts to erect a commemorative stone, a crowdfunding project aborted after the provincial officials' sudden change of heart. Since then, the witnesses have been threatened and monitored. Nevertheless, most of them are still engaged in keeping their story alive. Their sheer energy and the vividness of their memories demonstrate that despite being unfairly imprisoned and submitted to the harshest, most dehumanising treatment, some survive, remember, and speak. And if Wang Bing's walking shots in the dunes seem to stress the slow and ineluctable erasure of the material traces of history, these sequences also serve to unearth and preserve visually pieces of evidence that contribute to the transmission of the rightists' experiences. While *Dead Souls* is an unvarnished exposé of political suffering, death, and repressed history, the film is also a demonstration of the vitality that rests in testifying.

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1. As revealed during a Q&A session organised after the screening of *Dead Souls* at the EHESS (Paris) on 27 October 2018. My thanks to Sebastian Veg for providing the recording.
2. See Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China's Intellectuals*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Other filmmakers have tackled the same period in similarly monumental projects: Ai Xiaoming 艾曉明, *Jiabianguo Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists (Jiabianguo jishi 夾邊溝祭事)*, 2017, 375 min. The Folk Memory Project (*Minjian jiyi jihua 民間記憶計劃*), produced by Wu Wenguang 吳文光 (2010-ongoing) is a collection of interviews, 30 long-feature documentaries and three theatre plays based on testimonies from elderly villagers who survived the famine across China.
3. In the aforementioned Q&A session.