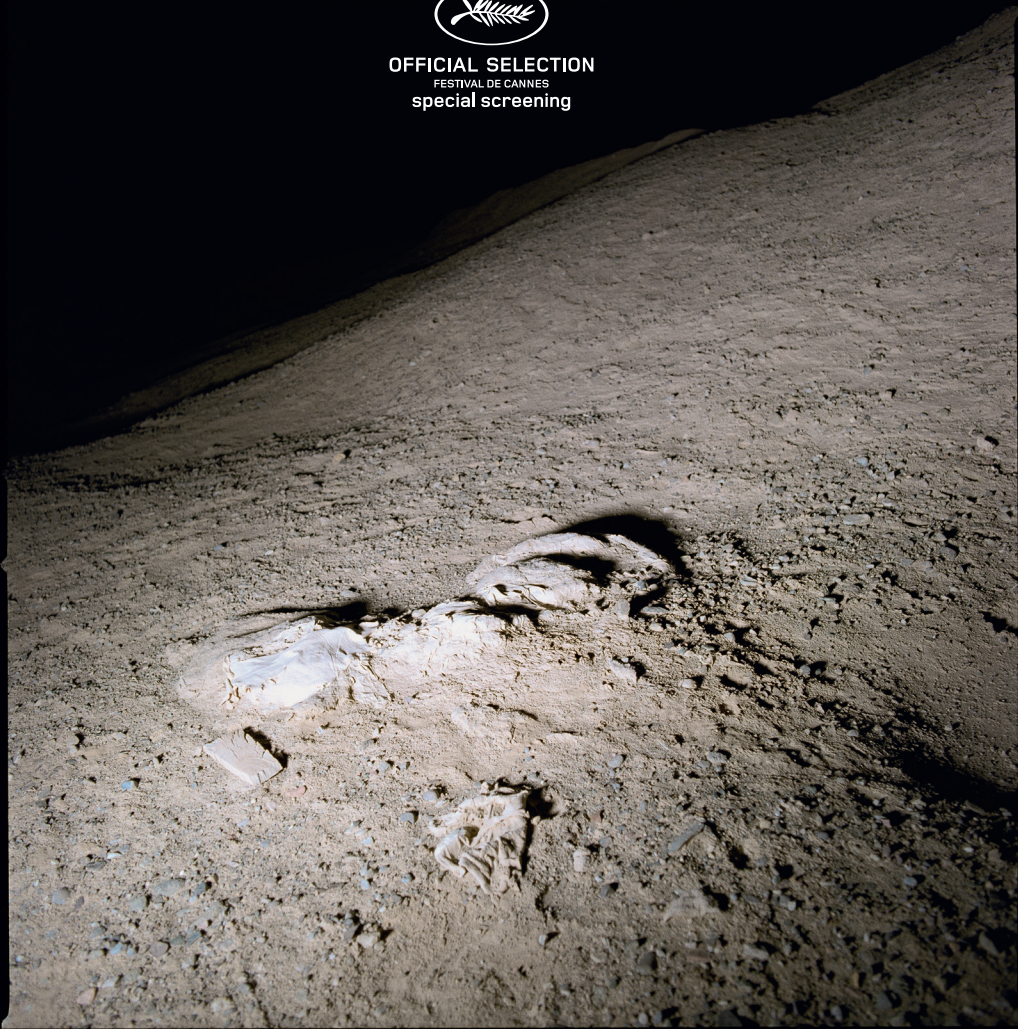


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DEAD SOULS

A FILM BY  
WANG BING

LES FILMS D'ICI, CS PRODUCTIONS AND ADOK FILM  
PRESENT



**OFFICIAL SELECTION**  
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# DEAD SOULS

A FILM BY  
**WANG BING**

FRANCE, SWITZERLAND - 2018 - 495 MIN - 1.85 - CHINESE

DISTRIBUTION FRANCE

**LES ACACIAS**

63, rue de Ponthieu  
75008 Paris

Tel. + 33 1 56 69 29 30  
acaciasfilms@orange.fr  
www.acaciasfilms.com

PRESS

**RENDEZ VOUS**

**VIVIANA ANDRIANI**

**AURÉLIE DARD**

2, rue Turgot – 75009 Paris  
Tél. + 33 1 42 66 36 35

viviana@rv-press.com / +33 6 80 16 81 39  
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# SYNOPSIS

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In Gansu Province, northwest China, lie the remains of countless prisoners abandoned in the Gobi Desert sixty years ago. Designated as “ultra-rightists” in the Communist Party’s Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957, they starved to death in the Jiabangou and Mingshui reeducation camps. The film invites us to meet the survivors of the camps to find out firsthand who these persons were, the hardships they were forced to endure and what became their destiny.



How did you come to be interested in the history of repression at the end of the 50s and early 60s, in those that the Chinese regime called the “Rightists”? What did you know about this period in history before beginning the immense research that has resulted in *Dead Souls*?

Without being a specialist on the subject I did know a little bit about it. For instance I knew that two of my father’s brothers had been accused of being rightists. The same thing happened to other inhabitants of my village. And in my childhood I heard talk about this particularly dark moment in our recent history.

Like myself, many people knew about it. We knew that there had been a repression, that a great number of persons had been sent to a reeducation camp because they had written or pronounced a single phrase, or for a detail, sometimes for nothing at all... But we didn’t know anything about the reality of the camps and life there. We were unaware of the magnitude of the purges, the countless deaths, the national scale of the anti-rightist movement. All is not well known. The perspective of the people didn’t go beyond the scope of a family or village.

Most the witness testimonies included in *Dead Souls* were recorded in 2005. Why have you waited twelve years to make this film?

I was busy with other projects, and with a fiction film, *The Ditch*, in particular, the making of which spurred my research on the “rightists”. In 2004, when I was a resident artist at the Cinéfondation in Paris, I read Yang Xianhui’s book, *Chronicles of*



*Jiabiangou*, which deals directly with the repression based on the testimonies of the victims. I immediately acquired the film rights for the book. By the end of my residency, I had written the film script. The book served as the basis for the film, but it was not sufficiently detailed in regard to places and life in the camps. For it to be truly complete, its transposition onto film necessitated in-depth research.



In order to fill in the gaps, and without at first thinking of anything other than making my fiction film, I set out to look for other testimonies of persons who had lived in the camps. But I'm first of all a documentarian: this is probably why it appeared to me very early on that there was

a film to be made of these testimonies, or at least the promise of a film. So I started thinking about making a documentary that would compile as many testimonies of the survivors as possible. Very quickly I realized that the project was one of a great complexity.

Firstly because extensive investigative work was needed. And secondly, the resources and time required to film just about everywhere in China had to be found. And then came the most important question: just how was the film going to be structured. This question came up naturally with each interview, which I tried to carry out with an overall view of the film in mind, but in reality I only found the film's structure after extensive editing work.

*The Ditch* was completed in 2010. In 2011, after having shot *Three Sisters*, I fell seriously ill and had to stop working for a while. I then made *'Til Madness do us Part* and it was only in 2014 that I was able to start working on *Dead Souls* again.

There were three camps: Jiabiangou, Mingshui, Xintiandun. How were they different? Is it important to make a distinction among them or did they form part of a single complex?

Jiabiangou was the name of the entire set of work camps situated in the province of Gansu. The complex was formed by the central unit of Jiabiangou, of Xintiandun and its annex situated approximately seven kilometers from the main unit and by Mingshui opened later, in autumn 1960, when most of the rightists of Jiabiangou had already died of tiredness and hunger.

And yet it is this last location that is announced when the film opens: “Mingshui, I”. Why is this camp so important? And why did you want to speak about this camp first when historically speaking it was the last camp to be opened?

To answer your question, I have to tell you that during the editing, I didn’t follow the chronological order of events but rather the order of the interviews. It so happens that the first interviews were filmed in the city of Lanzhou, and this city is located next to the Mingshui site. All the testimonies were related to this camp and that’s why it’s referred to first.

Why did this way of structuring the film supersede a chronological reconstitution?

The chronological reconstitution did seem more logical and easier to understand... but it wouldn’t have placed as much value on the testimonies, which for me was absolutely essential. What do all these people have in common? All were accused of being “rightists”, all lived through horrible, unimaginable things. And all had in common, of course, the fact that they survived. This is what fundamentally distinguishes them from the thousands who never came back. Their stories are thus very personal. Their focus is on describing the camps and on those who died there, but above all they reveal what each one of them had to do to stay alive, as well as the injustices they were subjected to from being categorized as a “rightist” until their rehabilitation in 1978, which didn’t wash away the stain that continued to weigh on them and their families.



At first, this surprised me a good deal and I must say that the very personal aspect of their stories bothered me a little. I had had the impression that I was as close to the truth as I could possibly be when I was on the site of the old camps, standing in the middle of these empty, deserted areas scattered with bones that had been abandoned without graves for decades. It is this sensation that I wanted to feel again in the stories and memories of the survivors. But I didn't find it, or not quite.



How did you finally succeed in closing the gap between the words of the survivors and the silence of the dead?

This problem obsessed me for several years, to the point where I questioned the possibility of making the film at all. As it is often the case, though, the

problem was the solution: I finally understood that it was this gap that would be the subject of *Dead Souls*. I finally realized that what interested me through the memory of the survivors was to be able to touch upon the reality of those who had died. But all this remains very theoretical... From a practical standpoint I still didn't know how the reality of those who were dead was going to come forth from the testimonies of those who were, on the contrary, still alive and who, when they were interviewed, spoke mostly of just that: the fact that they had survived. I only found the answer to this question in 2014. I had decided to re-interview the witnesses I had met with in 2005. I was determined that I was going to ask them more precise questions about their dead comrades. But in the meantime, some of these witnesses had died and others had become too weak. Their memories were failing. In one sense this obstacle was terrible, but in another it turned out to be a major advantage. The effort that these people made, who were now very old indeed and close to death themselves, to remember things that had happened so long ago, their attempts to remember the faces and names of their companions who had disappeared was very moving.

Suddenly I was faced with two relationships with death extremely close to one another: death in the camps and death due to old age. The second is natural; the first is not. Although in opposition to each other, they touch each other. And namely visually. I remember one person especially, among others: Zhou Zhinan, whom I filmed at a very old age in his hospital bed; thin and weak, his voice was barely audible. The images of him lying in his bed seemed to

illustrate the stories that his brother, Zhou Huinan had just told me, and specifically when he told me about his roommate who had died of hunger at Mingshui... I have a very hard time expressing with words what I felt at that precise moment. But I know that it is something that influenced me considerably in making *Dead Souls*.

Coming back to the film's structure, how did organization of the testimonies come into play here in what you like to call a "recounting" in each of your documentary films?

The first testimony in *Dead Souls* is that of a couple, Zhou Huinan and his wife. They give us some contextual data: how does one come to be accused? Who were the rightists? A second testimony opens the doors of the work camps



and explains how they were operated. A third one accompanies us deep inside the camp's life. From there on in we start listening to more detailed testimonies about the prisoners who died. An overall picture progressively forms: after three hours, the recounting offers us both a global and concrete vision of the living conditions in the camps.

Starting from the fourth hour, the testimonies are all from survivors who came from the same place and who more or less knew each other before being sent away. What happens then, in a completely natural way and without any interfering on my part is that the testimonies themselves become interlinked.

Those whom you met with had been victims of the repression. Did you also plan to direct your inquiries to the other side, i.e., to meet with and interview the accusers?

The only person I was able to meet with was a guard. He appears towards the end of the film and it is through him that we discover a photo of the camp. We have to remember that the leaders of the Party were already around forty years old in 1950. They are all deceased. That's the reason, with this one exception, why they are absent from the film.

You stir up troublesome memories, both painful and for many, humiliating. Did those you met with easily consent to talk about their ordeal?

When I started the interviews, China was experiencing a period of political and economic openness. Some of the persons I contacted didn't

want to talk about what happened, but most of them accepted readily to share their stories. I am aware, of course, that they concealed things from me. Everyone has a secret garden.

The extraordinary scene of Zhou Zhinan's funeral is one of the rare moments when the film steps away from the testimony pattern. Why open this parenthesis?

The recounting is not abstract. It is composed of real, flesh and blood individuals. The anger of Zhou's son, who talks of the injustices his father had been subjected to is exemplary in this regard. He doesn't make any speeches, doesn't talk in generalities. He tells us who his father was, how he lived, how he died. It seemed to me that a scene like this was needed rather early on to allow the viewer to really enter into the film.

Did the son in turn have to pay for the alleged faults of his father?

Without any doubt. Until 1978 all children of rightists were excluded from university and were socially ostracized.

What material in all have you definitively compiled?

120 testimonies. Around 600 hours of rushes.

How did you set about organizing and reducing such a mass?

I laid down a few editing rules for myself. I didn't want any one testimony to stand out from the



others. I wanted to ensure a kind of balance, because it was the whole that should stand out. From a formal standpoint, the testimonies all had to occupy as closely as possible the same space. And I realized during the editing that a good length for a testimony was around a half hour and that all the testimonies could comply with this limit.

Another principle: if the film was to be perceived as a whole, each testimony needed to have its own unity, its own autonomy. So I decided to never weave in and out of them, unlike some documentaries that, on the contrary, intertwine the stories being told. If one person is seen twice in the film it's because I returned to interview him/her a few years later. By doing it this way, I could respect the decision I'd made and spoke of earlier, i.e., to progress with the narrative by following the chronology of the interviews more than that of the events. This is why five hours of film - the last five - are devoted to the rightists who all came from the same place. Either the rightists themselves sent to the camps, or others, like Fan Peilin, who was the wife of a rightist, or again those that we became acquainted with through their letters.

There are still countless testimonies that I recorded in other regions. They will find their place in my future projects.

How are the eight hours of *Dead Souls* going to be presented to the public?

The film will be shown in Cannes in two parts: the first ends with Xing De, the old man with the goatee. The second begins with Zhao BinKun, the

shy man with the very white hair, and ends with Fan Peilin. In theatres, the film will be divided into three parts, each approximately two and a half hours long.

The Cannes Festival will give your work special exposure to the public. Can *Dead Souls* be considered, in one way or another, as taking a stance in relation to today's China?

No, I don't think so. When I want to tackle a topical issue I don't beat around the bush. Referring only to three examples, in *West of the Tracks* I revealed the plight of workers; in *'Til Madness do us Part*, life in a psychiatric asylum; in *Bitter Money*, I recounted the adventure of young immigrants looking for work on the east coast. *Dead Souls* covers a specific period in history, a specific event that I wanted to document in a detailed way because it is still only partially known. It goes without saying that when you make a film, you try to touch upon something universal and in a some way, timeless. The testimonies that make up *Dead Souls* belong to the history of humankind. In this sense one could possibly draw lessons from it for the present and the future, but the value of a film should not be mixed up with its subject. That of *Dead Souls* is quite clear and has absolutely no relationship with the today's China.

*Interview made by Emmanuel Burdeau*

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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Fifty-five years ago, in the wake of the Chinese 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, over 3200 accused rightists from various parts of Gansu Province were transported to Jiabiangou (“Pincer Gulch”) State Farm, a camp in the Gobi Desert, and forced to undergo a period of “ideological re-education through labour.” Over the next three years, approximately 2700 prisoners at Jiabiangou would die of starvation or overwork.

In 1957, the Chinese government launched an Anti-Rightist Campaign that included the following populations: urban residents; those working in governmental organizations, factories, universities, colleges, scientific research and cultural institutions; members of non-Communist or Democratic party organizations; and members of various societal and community organizations and associations. The campaign was targeted at those who had voiced criticism of the government during the first phase of the 1957 Rectification Campaign, a short period sometimes known in the west as the “Hundred Flowers Movement.” Other targets included those who had some past association with the Chinese Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang or KMT, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, whose followers fled to Taiwan in 1949), those who had criticized their bosses or local cadres, those who seemed dissatisfied or disgruntled with the current state of society, and those who had engaged in criminal offenses such as the theft or misuse of state property. Most of the people eventually labeled as “rightists”, were well-educated intellectuals working at various levels of government, academia, culture and industry.

Two decades later, between the years of 1978 and 1981, a nationwide campaign pardoned most of the accused rightists and restore their political

rights, a process known as “reversing the verdict.” Official Chinese government lists included the names of around 558,900 accused rightists, but the actual number of pardons issued during this period far outstripped that figure, because many of the accused never had their names submitted to the higher authorities, and thus were not included on the lists. Despite being left out of the official tally, these individuals – whose numbers included many young people, students, workers and citizens targeted at the local or organizational level – were still persecuted and punished as rightists during the 1970s.

Today, the overall verdict of the Chinese government is that the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign got out of hand and went too far beyond its intended scope. Nonetheless, neither the CCP nor the Chinese government has completely denounced or negated the Anti-Rightist Campaign. 96 (official number, but still controversial) accused rightists died without ever having the verdicts against them overturned.

# WANG BING

DIRECTOR, SCREENWRITER, CINEMATOGRAPHER, PRODUCER



Born in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China, in 1967, Wang Bing studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art and cinematography at Beijing Film Academy. He began his career as an independent filmmaker in 1999. Discovered in 2003, WEST OF TRACKS (Tiexi qu) an enormous documentary work of more than 9 hours long encountered a great success internationally. Besides feature documentary (THREE SISTERS/San zimei, 'TIL MADNESS/Feng'ai), he is also active in video installation (CRUDE OIL/ Yuanyou, a 14 hours film), directed several fiction (BRUTALITY FACTORY/Baoli gongchang, THE DITCH/Jiabiangou) and started a noteworthy work in photography.

His work has been selected for presentation and competition in many film festivals where he won a great number of awards. His documentaries have been release in theaters, with THREE SISTERS encountering a great success in France with more than 45.000 viewers. Acclaimed by critics and recognized as one of the most important Chinese artists, documentary makers and film directors of his time, he is being honored by retrospectives of his entire work in major museum, as in Centre Pompidou in Paris.



**DEAD SOULS (死灵魂)**  
 2018, Documentary, 496 minutes  
*Cannes 2018*

**15 HOURS (15小时)**  
 2017, Documentary, 900 minutes  
*Dokumenta 2017*

**MRS. FANG (方绣英)**  
 2017, Documentary, 86 minutes  
*Locarno Golden Leopard award 2017*

**BITTER MONEY (Kuqian / 苦钱)**  
 2016, Documentary, 155 minutes  
*Venice FF 2016, Orizzonti Competition*

**TA'ANG (De'ang / 德昂)**  
 2016, Documentary, 148 minutes.  
*Berlinale 2016, Forum*  
*Hong Kong IFF 2016*  
*Swedish Film Institute, 2016 (retrospective WANG Bing)*  
*Vilnius FF*  
*International Documentary & Short Film Festival of Kerala*  
*Melbourne IFF*  
*Locarno IFF*

**TRACES (Yizhi / 遗址)**  
 2014, Documentary (video art), 25 minutes.

**FATHER AND SONS (Fu Yu Zi / 父与子)**  
 2014, Documentary (video art), 40 minutes.

**'TIL MADNESS DO US PART (Feng Ai / 疯爱)**  
 2013, Documentary, 227 minutes.  
*Venice Film Festival, Out of Competition*  
*Toronto IFF*  
*Vancouver IFF*  
*Busan IFF*  
*Doc Lisboa, Competition*  
*Viennale*  
*Copenhagen CPH:DOX*  
*Festival des 3 Continents, Silver Balloon Award*  
*Rotterdam IFF*  
*Göteborg IFF*  
*Fribourg IFF, Competition*

**ALONE** (Gudu / 孤独)

2012, Documentary, 89 minutes.

*Black Movie Festival, Geneva, Critics Award*

*Rotterdam IFF*

*Melbourne IFF*

*Rio IFF*

*IDFA, Amsterdam*

*DocHouse, London*

**THREE SISTERS** (San zimei / 三姊妹)

2012, Documentary, 153 minutes.

*Venice Film Festival, Orizzonti Best Film Award*

*Doc Lisboa, Best Film Award*

*Festival des 3 Continents, Audience Award and Best Film Award*

*Dubai IFF, Best Documentary Asia Africa Award*

*Fribourg FIFF, Grand prix Award, Ecumenical jury Award, E-changer Award, Don*

*Quijote Award*

*Hong Kong IFF*

*Edinburgh IFF*

*New Zealand IFF*

*Taipei IFF*

**THE DITCH** (Jiabiangu / 夹边沟)

2010, Feature Film, 113 minutes.

*Venice Film Festival, Competition*

**MAN WITH NO NAME** (Wumingzhe / 无名者)

2009, Documentary, 97 minutes.

**COAL MONEY** (Tongdao / 通道)

2008, Documentary, 52 minutes.

*Cinema Du Reel, International Competition*

**CRUDE OIL** (Yuanyou / 原油)

2008, Documentary film installation, 14 hours.

Supported by Hubert Bals Fund Rotterdam.

*Rotterdam IFF*

*Hong Kong IFF*

**FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR**

(He Fengming / 和凤鸣)

2007, Documentary, 184 minutes.

*Cannes Film Festival, Official Selection*

*Toronto IFF*

*Rotterdam IFF*

**BRUTALITY FACTORY** (Baoli gongchang / 暴力工厂)

2007, Short in the anthology STATE OF THE WORLD.

*Cannes Film Festival, Director's Fortnight*

**WEST OF THE TRACKS** (Tiexi qu / 铁西区)

1999-2003, Documentary in three parts, 554 minutes.

Part 1: RUST (244 minutes)

Part 2: REMNANTS (178 minutes)

Part 3: RAILS (132 minutes)

*Lisbon International Documentary Festival, Grand Prize*

*Marseille Festival of Documentary Film, Grand Prize*

*Festival des 3 Continents, Golden Balloon Award, documentary section*

*Yamagata International Documentary Festival, Robert and Frances Flaherty Prize*

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