

CRITICAL ASIAN CINEMAS



Elena Pollacchi

Wang Bing's Filmmaking of the China Dream

Narratives, Witnesses and Marginal Spaces

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Critical Asian Cinemas

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Cover illustration: *Ta'ang* (Copyright courtesy of Asian Shadows)

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 183 7

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 115 6

DOI 10.5117/9789463721837

NUR 674

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*To my parents Maria Teresa and Rolando
To my mentors and friends Susan, Gina, Federico, and Alberto*



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Acknowledgements

Filmmaking is never an individual act as it implies a set of shared processes. This is equally true for this study on Wang Bing's work, which culminates many years of research, writing, and film viewing. I am indebted not only to a number of people for their trust and help, but also to a range of institutions that have supported my research since its start, more than a decade ago. I am particularly grateful to Amsterdam University Press for having welcomed this project and to Maryse Elliott for carefully guiding me through the publication process.

Through these acknowledgements I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all the people who have helped me bring this monograph to light, first and foremost to filmmaker and artist Wang Bing. His generosity in sharing his views and his ongoing projects, together with his passion for world cinema, have constituted both an incessant drive and the most rewarding moments throughout the writing of this book.

I owe a special thanks to my mentors, colleagues, and friends. In particular, Susan Daruvala, who was a wonderful supervisor during the years of my PhD studies at Cambridge University and continues to encourage my work as a friend and colleague. She kindly read through the final version of the manuscript making invaluable comments. Gina Marchetti at Hong Kong University has been supportive of this project since its early phases. I have benefitted greatly from our conversations, from her wonderful feedback, and from her final reading of the text. Chris Berry also shared his inestimable comments on the manuscript, providing essential insights, including on the many occasions we had the chance to discuss topics related to cinema, festivals, and the sinophone world. Alberto Barbera has not only allowed me to enter the world of film festivals as a young collaborator during his first mandate as the Venice Film Festival director back in 1999, but he continues to grant me his professional trust and personal friendship. His knowledge of film history, expertise in film programming, and his attention to contemporary cinema are always enlightening.

Wearing the two hats of scholar and festival programmer, I am greatly indebted to my colleagues at various institutions. At the Venice International

Film Festival, organized within the framework of La Biennale di Venezia, I wish to thank Angela Savoldi, Silvia Menegazzi, Annalisa Montesi, and Daniela Persi for their professional and friendly support during many years and many festivals. I also want to acknowledge all my colleagues in the Programming office and the administrative management of La Biennale di Venezia. I have had the pleasure of co-organizing and participating in many events dedicated to Wang Bing. Some of these were co-curated with two internationally renowned film experts, Nicola Mazzanti and Stefano Francia di Celle, to whom I express my gratitude. Furthermore, this work would not have been possible without the support of those producers, sales agents and film professionals who have shared my passion for Wang Bing's cinema. A warm thank you to Wang Yang, Isabelle Glanchant, Vincent Wang, Kong Lihong, and Zhu Zhu.

I cannot imagine what shape this study would have taken without the precious feedback received from many scholars and university colleagues at symposia and conferences around the world. While not being able to record everyone, I wish to express my gratitude to Alessandra Aresu, Silvia Casini, Serena De Marchi, Dina Iordanova, Marina Svensson, Sebastian Veg, Paola Voci, and Valeria Zanier. I also wish to thank all my long-term colleagues at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, first and foremost Federico Alberto Greselin, for many constructive discussions since my early years as a researcher, and Laura De Giorgi and Nicoletta Pesaro for their encouragement. I am also grateful to my colleagues at Stockholm University and at the University of Gothenburg, including Johan Lagerkvist, Fredrik Fällman and Martin Svensson Ekström.

I am indebted to many friends for their contributions to this volume. Peggy Kames and Tobia Maschio have patiently taken care of images and charts and read through several chapters of the manuscript. Eddie Bertozzi has always been my 'perfect discussant' when I have questioned certain passages, and Jonathan Sellers has responded to my incessant requests for language revisions. In addition, my undergraduate students Carlotta Andrea Telloi and Giacomo Pozzi have kindly assisted me in locating last-minute material.

Finally, and on a more personal note, I wish to thank Riccardo Castagna for having patiently supported this work; and Neil Robbins for always being on Susan's side and for providing a model for how to embark on book projects. Many friends have shared precious words with such generosity and without knowing how invaluable their friendship has been to bring this long research to its final writing stage. They include Arianna Calzà and Li Zhenkai, Nicola Callegaro, Alberto Casadei, Olaf Gehrke, Stefano Franceschi Ragghianti, Giulia Rosmarini, Elena Vianello and Davide Locas.



Editorial Note

This book follows the Chinese convention for Chinese names, that is, family names precede personal names (i.e. Wang Bing, Tsai Ming-liang). However there might be exceptions for the names in the English-language sources of authors who have adopted the English convention of the personal name preceding the family name (i.e. Yinjing Zhang).

The Chinese pinyin system is adopted for the Romanization of Chinese names (i.e. Zhang Yimou, Zhao Liang) unless the individual is already well-known with a different Romanization (i.e. Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wong Kar-wai). Pinyin is also provided after the first occurrence of the English translation for important Chinese terms and phrases that are directly relevant for the discussion (i.e. Chinese Dream/*Zhongguo meng*, re-education through labour/*laodong jiaoyang*).

When a Chinese film is referred to for the first time in the book, the film's international title in English is followed by the Chinese original title in pinyin and the year of distribution or world premiere. Non-Chinese films are indicated with their international title in English followed by their original title in the first occurrence. Film titles and references in French are not translated in English as they are mainly known with their original titles. All references in different languages are followed by their English translation (i.e. *Gaobie Jiabiangou*/Farewell to Jiabiangou). A full filmography of Wang Bing's works is provided at the end of the book for easy identification.





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Foreword

Just over fifty years have passed since François Truffaut encapsulated, in an evocative image, the prevailing presumption of contemporary theoretical reflection on film history and criticism. According to this presumption, film history could essentially be traced back to two main currents, harking back to the two different approaches of the Seventh Art's pioneers: on the one hand the 'ontological' realism of the Lumière Brothers – progenitors of documentary cinema; on the other hand, the spectacular inventiveness of George Méliès – progenitor of narrative and fictional cinema.

Truffaut described these two currents as vast rivers originating from the same source but flowing in parallel and with little chance of intertwining and even less of converging. Such a divide seemed to be confirmed by the attitude of an audience that was passively accustomed to giving diverging receptions to works belonging to these two diverse currents. Moreover, the production system, and the filmmakers too, considered documentary and fiction film as two neatly separate types of cinema, with a qualitatively different impact on the collective imaginary. Accordingly, this presumption continued to govern the prevalent approach of viewers, critics, producers, and film directors at least until the end of the twentieth century. Thus, it persisted until the deep formal and aesthetic transformations that characterize contemporary cinema finally dismissed the strict divide that had previously defined the semantic spectrum of each term – documentary and fiction – and embraced a more sophisticated articulation frame. Albeit without entering into detailed analyses of individual works and experimentations with film language that contributed to the convergence of these traditionally separate approaches, the proliferation of more sophisticated and complex expressive modes – now for all to see – is indebted to the mutual interaction of these two for long distinct worlds.

On the one hand, 'fiction film' has progressively adopted ways of representing the pro-filmic event that are part of the most advanced experiences of the 'cinema of the real'; on the other hand, the line of cinema that is conventionally and persistently called 'documentary' has increasingly developed a more conscious use of its own cinematic language. Going

Pollacchi, E., *Wang Bing's Filmmaking of the China Dream: Narratives, Witnesses, and Marginal Spaces*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021

DOI 10.5117/9789463721837_FORE



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beyond traditional understandings of the 'realistic' image, the latter, too, has appropriated stylistic and narrative features that have long been the privilege of fiction film.

Filmmakers such as Werner Herzog, Fredrick Wiseman, Gianfranco Rosi, Joshua Oppenheimer, and Roberto Minervini among others, have got us accustomed to works based on challenging yet fascinating assumptions. Their hybrid signature style – blending reality and fiction, documentary material and dramatic ambitions, facts, and narration – has shaped a film language that feels both ambiguous and captivating and, at least partially, unprecedented. These filmmakers take reality as their starting point in order to transcend it. They innovatively advocate a cinema that, while aiming to represent reality, or segments of it, does not conceal its own device behind the supposed absence of *mise en scène*, storytelling, and narrative processes. In brief, they testify to what makes each creative act possible, even when it seemingly refers, more or less straightforwardly, to the mere indexical reality. Each of them, and thus many other contemporary filmmakers, pursue this goal through a broad variety of original forms. Together, they shape a fresh understanding of 'documentary cinema' that Aline Caillet has defined as "a hybrid practice blending film, theatre, video and performance departing from the direct take on reality. By prompting certain conditions and creating new experiences, it has often emancipated itself from the sheer relation with reality which it should maintain nonetheless" (2014).¹

Against the definitive collapse of the long-established, and somehow reassuring, framework according to which image production was a strictly regulated and ring-fenced process, each of them guarding the stronghold of a specific genre or mode, a new film configuration has taken shape. In Marco Bertozzi's definition, this may be a "cinema of thought' which is able to encompass cognitive processes and the acts of viewing, shifting the attention from the overabundance of reality effects to the meaning-making process of its production. And, in questioning what appears natural and obvious to most, it actually turns into a vivid act of creative resistance" (2018). Or, by borrowing the definition used by another contemporary film scholar, Dario Cecchi, in this new form of film expression "the documentary instance combines with a set of other needs (including ethics, politics, narrative, and re-elaborating instances), so that its own preconditions have to be thought anew" (2016).

It is hard to resist the temptation to state that Wang Bing's oeuvre not only represents one of the many epitomes of this fascinating trend in contemporary cinema, but it also stands out as one of its most radical

1 Translations from the quoted texts by Elena Pollacchi.

and groundbreaking expressions, as testified in Elena Pollacchi's compelling in-depth analyses of Wang's corpus. Wang's cinema is still largely unknown to a broader audience, mainly due to the shrinking space for non-mainstream and art-house cinema in film exhibition. However, his stature is well-established among critics, curators, and scholars with an eye for innovative creative stances, also as a result of his regular presence at major international film festivals (Venice, Cannes, Berlin, Locarno). His works have also been featured at important art institutions worldwide, such as the Parisian Centre Pompidou and at the international art exhibition Documenta 14 in Kassel, in addition to his solo gallery exhibitions at the Paris-based Galerie Chantal Crousel and Galerie Paris-Beijing.

What characterizes Wang Bing's approach to filmmaking and makes him one of the most relevant filmmakers of our times, is his ability to push the boundaries of the experimentation with form and contents, film after film, in a conscious development of his filmmaking's potential. In addition, his work expresses the underlying ambition to build the most impressive audiovisual archive of contemporary Chinese society and its contradictions against the ongoing mainstream narrative of the China Dream, a catchphrase launched by President Xi Jinping in 2012 that encompasses the waves of economic policies that have shaped China's development until today.

This challenging critical and aesthetic project with its multiple articulations has progressively taken shape during the course of the filmmaker's career spanning over two decades, from Wang's 554-minute triptych debut film *Tiexi qu: West of the Tracks* (2002) to the most recent 330-minute documentary/installation *Beauty Lives in Freedom* (2018). No other filmmaker has been able to grasp with the same depth and understanding the transformation of Chinese society in the last two decades, its uneven development and the impact of state economic policies on the population. Yet, the significance of Wang's work also resides in his emphasis on the very act of filming as a means to develop his own unique approach to reality.

It is impossible to summarize Wang's craft, his method, and the importance of his cinematic achievements in the space of a short introduction. Pollacchi's essential and in-depth study sheds light on the complexity of Wang's work by detecting the features of his creative evolution. As she has noted in the introduction, "Wang's use of the handheld camera [is] a way of turning filmmaking into a process of creating knowledge about the world. He testifies to witnesses of the recent past as well as reports, archives, and provides tools to reflect upon certain phenomena such as labour issues, the position of intellectuals, the absurdity and violence of certain political campaigns". As Pollacchi has remarked, Wang's way of filming is based



on the tight relation between an immersive experience of space and the extended duration of it, so that the final viewing can significantly mirror the filmmaker's exploration of that very same space. The filmmaking process becomes an experience to be shared between the director and the social actors in their living and working settings; likewise, by watching the film, the viewer is ultimately involved in an active process of understanding the spaces, people, social conditions, or historical facts as they were first encountered by the filmmaker. To put it differently, Wang Bing's works originate firstly from the identification of a specific context and its social actors, and then move to share their daily routines for an extended period of time (and often for several years). In this process, the camera becomes a tool for an ongoing process of understanding and does not merely follow a predetermined shooting schedule or narrative structure as it might be imposed by a script, which actually does not exist. As Pollacchi notes, "Wang's increasing proximity to his social actors over time allows the audience to familiarize with spaces so as to engage in an active process of understanding."

Furthermore, "[f]ar from any anthropological or ethnographic approach, Wang's works connect spaces and human practice" to go beyond anthropological investigation, documentary activism, as well as narrative cinema. To conclude, I note Pollacchi's observation:

Wang has used his camera as a way to connect, register, and eventually share this process with the viewers in the diverse configurations of screenings and viewing experiences. [...] Wang Bing has been able to break the divide between narrative films, documentaries, anthropological investigation, and critical filmmaking in order to embrace them all in a personal interpretation of cinema. In Wang's vision, social inequalities, political injustice, or other historical wounds come to the fore by means of a painstaking process of observing, filming, editing, and, finally, exhibiting, either in theatres or art exhibition spaces.

The originality of his craft, the richness of his human and social exploration, and his ability to trace an alternative trajectory with his works to that of the mainstream state narratives and economic policies, confirm the importance of Wang's achieved position in contemporary cinema. Together with the relevant self-reflection on the role and the position of the filmmaker vis-à-vis the society, they also highlight the political and aesthetic significance of his incessant cinematic search.

Alberto Barbera (Venice Film Festival Director)



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Introduction

Abstract

The introduction focuses on the relevance of Wang Bing's filmmaking and his international profile. His stature as an acclaimed documentary auteur has been confirmed by many important international awards both in the field of cinema and the arts. He has a reputation for bringing the lives of marginalized people and the spaces of their daily life to the screen in uncompromising ways. In looking at Wang's poetics of cinema, this study closely links form, theme, and narrative structure in Wang's work in response to China's social and economic transformation. Wang's work is also discussed in light of other filmmakers and world cinema classics.

Keywords: Documentary cinema, China, Spaces, Poetics, Witnessing, Subaltern, Labour, History, Wang Bing

The relevance of Wang Bing's filmmaking

My long-term investigation of the filmmaking of Wang Bing, now defined as one of the major documentarists of our times, was prompted by a set of questions to be outlined below.¹ Born in 1967, in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi province, one of the central regions in China, Wang studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts and cinematography at the Beijing Film Academy, before beginning his career as an independent filmmaker in 1999. Since his international debut with the nine-hour epic *Tiexi qu: West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu*, 2002),² Wang's name has gradually

1 The French art and culture magazine *Transfuge* dedicated its cover to Wang Bing in November 2018. In an article on Wang Bing's cinema published in the same issue, François Bégaudeau declared him "today's greatest documentarist" (*Transfuge* no. 123, November 2018, p. 46).

2 The international title of the film *Tiexi qu: West of the Tracks* is abbreviated as *West of the Tracks* throughout this book as is common practice in English-language literature on the film. An initial editing of 300 minutes was first screened in the Forum section of the Berlin Film

become a major and recurrent presence at film festivals, museums, and art institutions worldwide. He has completed a significant number of works including a dozen major full-length documentaries and several shorter documentary works, the full-length feature film *The Ditch* (*Jiabianguo*, 2010), and one short feature film. He has also been active in several video installations and photographic projects and continues to work on ongoing projects so that these figures are constantly subject to change. Controversial in the People's Republic of China, Wang has dealt with spaces and people usually neglected in the current circulation of China-related images. He has built a reputation for bringing the lives of marginalized populations to the screen in uncompromising ways. His works have chronicled the stories of China's heavy industry workers, migrant labourers, rural children, and others left behind by a rapidly modernizing nation.

Wang's relevance as a filmmaker has been confirmed by the major awards he has received at film festivals worldwide, including the Golden Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2017 for *Mrs Fang* (*Fang Xiuying*, 2017) and the Best Film (Orizzonti Section) for *Three Sisters* (*San zimei*, 2012) at the 69th Venice International Film Festival in 2012, followed by many other international film awards.³ Since early on in his career, Wang Bing's works have also featured in art galleries and art exhibition spaces, confirming the broad spectrum of his moving image outputs and expanding his international reputation across the film and the visual arts scenes. Retrospectives of his works have taken place at major international art institutions, including the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Royal Belgian Film Archive in Brussels in 2014, Documenta 14 in Kassel (Germany) in 2017, and the Museo Reina Sofia and Filmoteca of Madrid in 2018. In 2017, he was awarded one of the most prestigious contemporary art awards, the EYE Art & Film Prize in Amsterdam, for his entire filmography and he has had solo exhibitions at the CCA Wattis Institute (San Francisco) and at the Galerie Chantal Crousel (Paris), among others. In 2019, Wang Bing held a teaching post at the Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains – the French institution for higher artistic teaching.

In the context of such high international praise and, at this crucial time in history as China is recognized as one of the world's economic and political

Festival in 2002 but was then replaced by the 554-minute version screened in Rotterdam in 2003.

3 *Three Sisters* was first screened in Venice on 7 September 2012. Subsequently, it won top awards in Dubai, Fribourg, Lisbon, and Nantes. While very little of Wang Bing's oeuvre has been publicly screened in the People's Republic of China and Chinese literature on his work remains limited, the news of major prizes has widely circulated in the Chinese media.



superpowers, this thorough discussion of Wang Bing's cinema aims to shed some light on the role and the potential of filmmaking in relation to transforming spaces, social issues, and the legacy of sensitive historical facts. First and foremost, Wang's works document ongoing processes while, at the same time, allowing a discussion of how the camera becomes a personal tool in the hands of a filmmaker. Wang's immersive handheld camera delivers an experience involving the viewers on a global scale, regardless of their knowledge of China. This experience, which has evolved along with Wang's craft over the course of the filmmaker's career, involves watching images and being imbued in a soundscape while, at the same time, learning *something* in the process. This *something* might be something about China, about issues shared by contemporary societies, and even about our own positioning as cinema-viewers facing such issues on a screen.

We must now ask what makes Wang Bing's films so special when compared to the hundreds of documentary films, and films in general, made in China and elsewhere every year? Or, why do his works appear so distinct from those of other Chinese documentary filmmakers, some of whom have prestigious resumé's and participate at major international film festivals, such as Du Haibin, Zhao Liang, among others, and even the internationally celebrated artist Ai Weiwei, whose work includes a set of documentary films? Yet, in terms of circulation and reception, only Wang has had most of his films presented at the three most established international film festivals Cannes, Venice, and Berlin – often with awards. Moreover, his works have also been supported and presented at major art galleries and museums around the world. Wang's ways of filmmaking have therefore granted him increasing relevance, not only in film circles, but also in the art scene. Some of his films have also circulated in cinemas and on DVDs in several European countries and in the US. Although not officially screened in China, some of his works were accessible through pirated DVDs and a very few screenings have been organized within the framework of international cultural institutions such as foreign cultural institutes.⁴

This leads to another question: who is the audience for his cinema? Although Wang's work does not openly challenge the structures and film authorities of the People's Republic of China, they do not conform to the pattern and ways of state-approved Chinese film production. The filmmaker has never sought official approval or gone through the process of obtaining censorship certificates, so that domestic circulation of his works is not

4 Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* was available in China as a pirated copy of the French MK2 DVD edition.

possible. Yet, he does not seem inclined to make the effort to change this situation. As he has often stated, his cinema is made for everyone who is interested in it, either now or, maybe, in the future. His audience might therefore be a prospective audience in the near future, or in years to come. Recalling Benedict Anderson's introduction to his discussion of nationalism as the creation of an imagined community (1983[2006]: 5–7), we could say Wang Bing has turned the contemporary notion of 'Chineseness' upside-down while still being connected to it. This notion includes the image of China promoted by the state and the informal notion of China as a successful country, which is disseminated together with diverse images of China's economic growth. What is made visible in Wang Bing's films lacks any 'oriental flavour' and is precisely the opposite of exoticism. There is nothing that recalls the beauty of the 'Orient' and nothing for the audience to connect with in terms of the 'exotic'. Yet, some post-Orientalism can be found in the way Wang Bing's cinema testifies to what is usually unexplored in China, while belonging to a different world than the 'West'. Wang's film practice, therefore, somehow responds to the need of the imagined community of film-viewers, film professionals, festival delegates, and gallery curators for whom China can still be defined, or at least better understood, by means of its cinema. Furthermore, as I will point out throughout this book, Wang Bing's cinema manages to raise questions that go beyond the specificity of the Chinese case to embrace issues related to global development and contemporary societies.

As a final preliminary question, what makes Wang Bing's filmmaking viable to so many different audiences, across different exhibition spaces, and through different screening formats? Or, to put it differently, why has Wang Bing come to occupy such a prominent position within contemporary culture so as to deserve the attention of festival programmers, art curators, and scholars alike, despite his fairly limited public visibility? This is the crucial question that has encouraged me to transform my long-term research on his cinema into a monograph. My interest was prompted by the showing of Wang's debut film *West of the Tracks* at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2003. The screening of this groundbreaking documentary on the dismissal of workers in the large industrial districts of Liaoning in Northeast China was also the first of many occasions on which we met regularly in the following two decades. In this time, in addition to our many professional encounters related to my activities as a festival programmer and as a Chinese studies scholar, we have developed a close friendship. During these nearly twenty years, Wang's position in the world of contemporary culture has become solid enough to enable him to become one of the leading



documentary filmmakers of our times, as the many interviews, articles, and catalogues published in different languages and at different stages in his career have confirmed. I myself have published a string of articles on his work. However, no research has so far examined Wang's oeuvre as a whole, systematically analysing his entire output in a study that reveals how Wang's films speak to each other in not immediately obvious ways. While scholars and film critics agree in praising his uncompromising perspective on contemporary China, his work has not yet been discussed as a coherent and evolving cinematic and visual enterprise. By looking at his career as an informal yet consistent project, I hope this book can contribute to a better understanding of Wang's work as that of a contemporary auteur aiming at recording, archiving, and exposing the contradictions of contemporary societies with China as the focus.

Moreover, Wang Bing also prompts a set of challenging theoretical questions related to pivotal relationships such as filmmaking and the social context, filmmaking and history, and filmmaking across different exhibition circuits. Here, I address some of these relations by looking at Wang's films as a corpus with a shared aesthetic, some common production constraints, and the consistent though ever evolving approach to the filmmaking process as a way of 'extracting narrative from reality' and presenting it through a viewing experience. As the filmmaker has often declared, the camera should move around the space and towards the subjects without a pre-established structure, so that the context and the social actors come to define the structure of the narrative, and not the other way around, as in the case of films with a script.⁵ Furthermore, none of his films, installations, short films, commissioned works, or even photographic oeuvres, is a one-dimensional or 'stand-alone' work. Works-in-progress and completed works talk to one another by referring to previously approached topics or featuring intertextual connections or presenting connections in relation to the productive structure. Together, they compose a constellation comprising different audiovisual outputs in which China is the main object of analysis but the issues at stake relate to contemporary societies on a global scale.

Since most of Wang's works share an interest in China's interplay between past and present, its ongoing contradictions, and some hidden pages in Chinese history, I have encompassed them under the heading of a 'counter-narrative of the China Dream', which is associated with post-Mao China

5 Wang Bing has also explained his views on storytelling and the nature of history in a video interview, 'The True Nature of Story – A Conversation with Wang Bing' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_EenguA7Og [accessed 20 October 2016].

and even more with the outcome of Chinese economic reforms that were launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. The China Dream (*Zhongguo meng*), or the Chinese Dream, is one of the most effective catchphrases circulating both domestically and internationally.⁶ It is the image that China is projecting to the world as a successful, welcoming, and ever-growing country. As such, it is also part of the narrative of Chinese 'soft power'. Yet, where current leader Xi Jinping has coined the phrase 'China Dream' as part of his domestic and international political strategy, Wang's films can be understood as a response that shows the less ideal aspects of China's rise. This conceptual framework contributes to a more fruitful reading of Wang's oeuvre as it puts the basis for connecting his aesthetics to the subject matters of his films against current socio-economic and political contexts. In particular, this notion allows a discussion of his cinema within the broader framework of Chinese history, politics, society, and culture and, more specifically, against the uneven landscape that China's economy has shaped in the forty years of reforms. This investigation takes Wang's filmmaking as a holistic system, in which individual works bear some connection while simultaneously relating to current discourses on China, how the country is perceived, and how it is presented to the world. Furthermore, insofar as China's growth implies a rapid engagement with neoliberalist economic structures and the parallel reduction of welfare supports, Wang's works also speak to a much larger global audience, albeit without losing their Chinese distinctiveness.⁷

Themes, form, and narrative structure: A linked approach to Wang Bing's filmmaking

This book has two intertwining points of entry: the first is related to Wang Bing's choice of material and his subject matter; the second to the evolution

6 For a thorough review of the slogan China Dream, or Chinese Dream, and related scholarly debates, see Callahan (2015). The webpage of the *China Daily* – the only English daily paper officially published in China – provides an updated outline of the elements and policies connected to the Chinese Dream <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/Chinese-dream.html> [accessed 28 September 2017]. The video by CGNT 'The Chinese Dream is a Global Aspiration' describes the China Dream in a short English informative message <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgBiLBQeco8> [accessed 8 March 2020]. The topic of the China dream in relation to screen and literary culture was largely discussed during the international conference 'Exploring the China Dream. Trajectories and Articulations of Soft Power in the Sinophone World' held at Stockholm University on 15–16 August 2016, co-organized by the author of this book. In this volume, the terms China Dream and Chinese Dream are used interchangeably.

7 I am indebted to Chris Berry for this comment.



of his filmmaking over the course of his career. I believe a parallel discussion of these aspects, namely linking themes, form, and narrative structures, helps further clarify the relevance of Wang's cinema to both the knowledge of contemporary China (and its recent history) and to the rapid development of documentary filmmaking practices. Therefore, the tight connection or interdependence between his work and the historical processes that have shaped today's China in the last two decades is the essential assumption upon which this book is grounded.

Hence, rather than highlighting specific aesthetic features, I discuss Wang's uses of the handheld camera as a way of turning filmmaking into a process of creating knowledge about the world. He provides the testimony of witnesses of the recent past, and supplies the tools to reflect upon certain phenomena such as labour issues, the position of intellectuals, the absurdity and violence of certain political campaigns.

Taken together, this might encourage us to look at Wang Bing as an activist, a definition that he generally refuses, as it risks overlooking the importance of cinematic construction in favour of subject matter. On the contrary, Wang's images and his character- or space-driven narratives are constantly imbued with a tension between the immediate visual pleasure resulting from the viewing experience and their encouragement of reflection and thoughtful consideration. In most cases, the beauty of Wang's moving images is drawn out of unattractive spaces, uneasy social settings, marginal areas, and marginal people struggling in their daily life.

Furthermore, this tension underlying Wang's aesthetics helps connect his cinema to a line of filmmaking that can be defined as 'cinema of engagement', or described as cinema exposing the contradictions imbued in the relationship between the individual and society. This includes the works of film masters such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Terrence Malick, in addition to contemporary filmmakers such as Pedro Costa and Claude Lanzmann, among others. It also harks back to pioneering days of documentary cinema with the Lumière brothers. By connecting the Chinese filmmaker to these film directors and documentarists, I aim to insert him into a line of film history that goes beyond the two traditional distinctions, the first one between filmmaking in the East and West of the world, and the second one between non-fiction and fiction film. Moreover, this comparative dimension can be understood as a further way to connect to the audience that is currently most engaged with Wang's work, the film festival- and gallery-goers. This is also in consideration of the fact that Wang's work is not submitted to Chinese censorship and is therefore neither distributed, nor well known in China.



An anecdote from the presentation of Wang's *Bitter Money* (*Ku qian*, 2016) at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival in September 2016 serves well to introduce the collapse of the fiction/non-fiction divide. The screening material of the documentary was received only 48 hours prior to the first screening – an extremely tight timing for testing and verifying the DCP (Digital Cinema Package), the material currently used in theatres instead of traditional film formats. The selection of *Bitter Money* had been confirmed just a few weeks earlier on the basis of a rough cut that gave us programmers an overall idea of the film but was not yet the final cut. When the DCP reached Venice, no one, not even the filmmaker and his own staff, had yet seen the entire film in its complete version on a big screen. The press screening, the first one of three, was scheduled on 9 September 2016, the last day of the festival. The jury members were actually the first ones to watch the work in its final version. They had a private screening the day before as they needed to discuss it before the awards ceremony. Despite such a last-minute schedule, the film was awarded the Best Script in the Orizzonti section, a section Wang Bing had already won with the Best Film Award for the documentary *Three Sisters* in 2012. That year was also the first in which the festival featured no distinction between fiction and non-fiction films in all the different sections of the programme.⁸ Right after the jury had decided to give the Best Script award to *Bitter Money*, the festival came to me as the programmer for Chinese films in order to find out the name of the scriptwriter, so that it could be correctly engraved on the awarded lion statue. This question created a paradoxical situation, such that when Wang and his team heard about the award, they felt more surprised than happy. In fact, the question about the scriptwriter would have been perfectly legitimate for a certain line of documentary cinema, including works such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016) for which the filmmakers are also credited as writers, but this was not so in Wang's case. He had often insisted on the prominence of the way actual facts unfold in real life over the use of a pre-defined text or script. Even during the press conference for the Venice awards, Wang declared that stories are always part of the reality the filmmaker has the chance to observe during the shooting process. And he went on to say that stories have to be presented to the audience in such a way that the audience can have

8 The year following the presentation of *Three Sisters*, was the first year documentary was included in the Venice main competition with the Golden Lion to Gianfranco Rosi's documentary *Sacro Gra* (2013).

a close perception of how the filmmaker had discovered and approached them in the first instance. Like most of Wang's documentaries, *Bitter Money* had no preliminary script and the 'storyline' did not exist before the filmmaker started his own exploration of that specific industrial area in Southern China. The filmmaking process was actually conceived as a way of *sharing the experience* of investigating spaces and people in an area of China entirely devoted to the production of garments. This implies establishing a relationship with the social actors and their milieu in such a way that the viewers can also establish their relationship with the film. The filmmaker's use of the camera becomes a tool in an open process of learning, rather than being a process pre-established by the filmmaker and relying on a pre-defined script. After some discussion, the Orizzonti Award for the Best Script was eventually listed as awarded to 'Wang Bing's *Bitter Money*' with no scriptwriter's name engraved on the statue.

The Venice episode points to one of the notions at the basis of Wang Bing's cinema. Stories are 'extracted', selected, understood, and singled out from China's surrounding human and social landscape rather than previously conceived on paper or in the filmmaker's mind. Through the audio and visual experience – and often thanks to its extensive duration – the viewer becomes familiar with spaces, people, social conditions, and historical facts in a way not dissimilar to that of the filmmaker when he first approached the area and the social actors. Such a notion implies a *shared process* through which the filmmaker activates an epistemological process in which the audience is encouraged to explore, connect, and reflect upon the filmed material.

As a final methodological note, this monograph aims to unpack the dynamics of such an epistemological process. It is also a critical reflection on how films produce knowledge and communicate this knowledge to others. The aesthetics connected to it has somehow become the trademark of Wang Bing's cinema. His journey across China capturing rough images of the subaltern, his vivid human portraits, and his ability to detect traces of hidden pages in Chinese history are closely connected, or rather juxtaposed and opposed, to the images of China as a superpower. Starting from such premises, Wang Bing's film practice is far from being simple and straightforward. Dealing with the uneasy relationship between the current social spaces, human conditions, and China's marginalities implies a set of challenges for the filmmaker, from financing to shooting and distributing. This book hopes to shed some light on Wang's film practice as a way to deal with such challenges – including filming actual places and actual people against the current limitations of independent film production in China

and abroad. With David Bordwell's concept of a poetics of cinema in mind, it also aims to connect close film analyses to their historical contexts.⁹

Wang Bing *à la* Wong Kar-wai

My discussion of Wang Bing's oeuvre adopts a bottom-up approach similar to that of Gary Bettinson's analysis of Wong Kar-wai's films, which takes the films' particularities as its start (2014). In line with Bordwell's approach to a poetics of cinema, Bettinson proposes a close analysis of Wong Kar-wai's cinema in which he takes the denotative level as a starting point and then brings into the discussion issues derived from, yet not limited to, culturalist and postmodernist approaches as well as references to other filmmaking traditions. That is a way to look at each film 'in context' and in relation to other works.

Although juxtaposing Wong Kar-wai and Wang Bing might appear hazardous, some commonalities can be found. Both Wong Kar-wai and Wang Bing are strenuous cinephiles with a passion for film history that cuts across genres and film traditions. They are also conscious of the importance of the festival circuits and how their presence within the circuit has contributed to their auteur status. Moreover, their work shows a fascination for *spectacle*. This implies that formal elements – mise en scène, sound and editing – are used as key features to articulate the narrative, rather than the use of scriptwriting. In both cases, and with no distinction between feature film or documentary, the narrative is beautifully constructed in terms of visuality but, at the same time, is not easily given to the viewer, who is required to maintain an active role throughout the whole viewing process. This viewing process is never just visual but makes use of sound so as to create an immersive dimension in which the viewer is progressively absorbed. The spectacle, which bears a connotation of passive observation turns, in Wang Bing's case, into an *experience* and an epistemological process. However, for both Wang and Wong Kar-wai, the construction of the cinematic spectacle implies a dedication to the act of filming that is almost turned into an obsessive act from the side of the filmmaker. This is demonstrated, for example, by the legendary long shooting process of Wong Kar-wai whose films take years to be completed with scenes being re-taken incessantly. In the case of Wang Bing, such devotion to the act of filming

9 Bordwell's theory of a poetics of cinema is presented in detail in the volume *Poetics of Cinema* (2007).



reached its apex when he fell ill during the making of *Three Sisters*, in 2011, due to his incessant shooting in the strenuous conditions and high altitude of the Yunnan mountains. Finally, the filming method and the production modes of these two filmmakers are the foundations of their visual output. The words Bettinson used for Wong Kar-wai can apply to Wang Bing as well, for “without his unique production methods, [his] films would lose their distinctive aesthetics” (2015: 2).

Referring back to the opening paragraphs of this introduction in which I discussed the relevance of Wang Bing’s filmmaking, if there is now a general agreement as to the stature of Wang’s oeuvre, its relevance is not only related to Wang Bing’s film aesthetics, but also to its context. His distinctive and narrativized use of documentary material shot in specific areas of China – far from the classical documentary modes – speaks to the general instability and social uncertainty that are shared concerns at all latitudes. It is against our current historical juncture that Wang’s documentaries – approached here through the lens of the counter-narrative of the China Dream – are seen as critical statements and discussed as a way of exposing social contradictions or sensitive pages of recent history. An interdisciplinary perspective bringing together film and social studies, as well as cultural geography, can be extremely useful in addressing issues such as marginalization, labour issues, and the post-socialist turn towards neoliberalism. However, such a perspective bears the risk of losing sight of the denotative level of the films, their cinematic surface, and their visual pleasure. Although culturalist paradigms in film and documentary studies are crucial for pinpointing the relevance of recurrent social issues, they tend to have a top-down approach in which films are seen as illustrative of certain topics and theories. They risk downplaying (or reducing) the filmmaker’s search and struggle to improve the poignancy and *effectiveness* of his own aesthetics.

As a response to that, I argue that Wang Bing’s aesthetics – or poetics, to use Bordwell’s terminology – cannot be detached from the discussion of the subject matter and its context. When looking at Wang’s work, image composition is as important as the socio-economic background of actual spaces and social actors, and so is the visual and emotional impact on the viewers. Therefore, it would be difficult to prioritize either a top-down culturalist approach or a sheer formalist approach. In order to encompass all aspects, the aesthetics and the socio-economics ones, close film analyses and broader cultural discussion are equally needed.

My readings of Wang’s films aim to highlight aesthetic features, production stories, and intertextual connections, or allusions, among different

works as well as among Wang's oeuvre and other filmmakers. As part of his poetics, by establishing such connections, this discussion also hopes to move away from an investigation of Chinese documentary filmmaking as a 'Chinese' or 'local' practice. This contributes to the debate on a *transnational* film aesthetics (Bordwell 2001; Zhang 2014) that has now become an even more crucial feature against the production and circulation of independent audiovisual works. In fact, Wang Bing's works, regardless of their medium, format, duration, and exhibition platform and despite their geographical and cultural distinctiveness, have proven universally appreciated and operate across cultures. His first groundbreaking work, *West of the Tracks*, not only managed to expose issues pertaining to the Chinese context at the turn of the twentieth century, but also addressed global themes such as laid-off workers, migration, and deterioration of social structures. His cinema has talked to audiences across the globe without any specific Chinese connotations but rather recalling the many cinematic experiences of workers and factories in films, with the Lumière brothers as the first case in point.

The book's genesis and structure

This monograph is the result of nearly two decades of personal and professional contacts with Wang Bing and his close collaborators. As mentioned above, I started looking at his cinema on the occasion of the first screening of *West of the Tracks* at the Rotterdam Film Festival in January 2003. I was then working as a programme advisor for Chinese film for the Turin International Film Festival in Italy and, together with the festival directors at the time, Roberto Turigliatto and Giulia D'Agnoletto Vallan, we decided to invite Wang Bing to present his long documentary at the following festival in November 2003. Since then, our meetings have been regular, either in Europe or during my visits to China. In 2004, I started serving the Venice International Film Festival as consultant for the selection of Asian films. This position has allowed me to travel frequently to China, and to many other film events worldwide, while granting me access to first-hand information. I was also able to have regular meetings with Wang Bing, either in Europe or in China. Our long conversations have spanned all subjects, yet we have often focused on the complex interplay between Chinese cinema, international film festivals, and the socio-political context in which film practices are inscribed in today's China and globally. Since 2012, when Alberto Barbera took over direction of the Venice festival, I have also had the chance to contribute to the presentation of *Three Sisters*, *'Til Madness*



Do Us Part (Feng ai, 2013), and *Bitter Money* and have been able to follow their making from an early stage.¹⁰ Thanks to this long friendship, I have also been able to access Wang's many different projects at various stages and look closely at their making. Furthermore, I have benefitted from being able to access material that has not publicly circulated (and therefore will not be extensively discussed here), yet which informs this book. Having known Wang Bing since 2003, I believe that a discussion of his cinema through the lens of his own personal life would not prove particularly illuminating. Therefore, biographical notes are limited to this introduction.

As a scholar, I have previously approached Wang's oeuvre in a series of journal articles discussing some specific aspects of his work. They constitute the basis of this monograph and some of my earlier considerations are here reworked and expanded (Pollacchi 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2019). In those analyses, I have looked at his cinema from different perspectives, in particular at the interplay between history and spaces, labour issues, documentary cinema, and witnessing, film exhibition in gallery spaces, as well as Wang's admiration for Italian film masters such as Pasolini, Visconti, and Antonioni. Here, I hope to bring my previous work into a more extensive and organic discussion so as to connect these different aspects in the light of Wang's aesthetics as an auteur and its evolution during the course of his career.

Nonetheless, this monograph is not specifically intended as a catalogue of the entirety of Wang Bing's output, including full-length, medium-length, and short films, video installations, and photographic series. Although I hope to shed light on his production as a consistent project, he is indeed a prolific filmmaker and, thanks to his strenuous shooting process, he has collected hours of shooting material, some of which has been reused years later for projects other than the one for which it was originally filmed. He often digs out and completes projects that were started years earlier, thus making the task of providing an exhaustive investigation of his oeuvre an over-ambitious task. Moreover, after having completed his only full-length feature film so far, *The Ditch*, in 2010, Wang's production pace has significantly increased and he has also worked on more than one project at a time. Partly for this reason, this investigation does not follow a strictly chronological order but is organized instead across three major focuses, which are also Wang's recurrent

10 Alberto Barbera served as the director of the Venice International Film Festival for the first time during the editions 1999–2001, followed by Moritz de Hadeln for the 2002–2003 editions and Marco Müller from 2004 to 2011. Barbera received his second appointment as the Venice festival director in 2012 and the third (ongoing) in 2020.

themes: labour; history; and the experience of the individual in today's China, in particular marginal people. Another reason for not looking at a strict chronological development of Wang's career is the fact that he returns to certain topics at different times with a particular emphasis on certain *spaces*.

As I will point out in the next chapter, which helps locate the actual, geographical trajectory of Wang's cinematic activities, the broad concept of *space* and its diverse articulations play a central role in Wang's cinema. By looking at the film locations over a map of China, the first chapter also aims to set Wang Bing's cinematic travelogue against the ongoing state narrative of the China Dream. Although this catchphrase epitomizing the success of Chinese economic reforms was only launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2012, shortly after taking the position of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, it also summarizes the process of market-oriented reforms that Deng Xiaoping started in 1978. This transformation continued through the leaderships of Jiang Zemin (1993–2003) and Hu Jintao (2003–2013).¹¹ In all his works, Wang has testified to the many contradictions and the uneven impact of the rapid transformation on different areas of China. In that sense, his cinema can be read as an informal counter-narrative of the current political line with space as a key concept.

The second chapter discusses Wang Bing's pivotal debut *West of the Tracks* as the starting point of his approach to filmmaking and it engages with both history and labour issues. It was the result of almost two years of editing from more than 300 hours of material shot during three years and pointed to Wang's way of observing 'history in the making' and extrapolating narratives from an extensive process of shooting. This extensive analysis also forms the basis for connecting Wang's cinema to world film history by referring on the one hand to the Lumière brothers' early documentaries, and on the other hand to Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978).

The following chapters take different articulations of space as their entry points. An in-depth discussion of Wang Bing's documentary filmmaking in relation to spaces of labour is provided in the third chapter through close analyses of *Three Sisters*, *'Til Madness Do Us Part*, and *Bitter Money*. This chapter also offers a comparative reading of *Three Sisters* and John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

The fourth chapter revolves around one of the central concerns of Wang's work: history, and deals with spaces of history and memory. How does the

11 For an in-depth analysis of the Chinese recent leaderships, see Fewsmith (2008). The dates reported here correspond to the years in which the leaders were in office as President of the People's Republic of China. Xi Jinping became President in March 2013.

past affect the present? How is the past still part of ordinary people's lives today? How do spaces – both physical and social spaces – preserve traces of the past? Moreover, how do they do it when the past relates to sensitive pages of the country's history? This chapter focuses on Wang's works related to the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–1959. It is divided into two sections. In the first, I give a close reading of his only full-length feature film so far, *The Ditch*, and a comparative reading of it with Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975). I also connect Wang's work to that of contemporary filmmaker Pedro Costa. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss his mature work *Dead Souls* (*Si linghun*, 2018) as a visual archive of witnesses to this particular campaign and as a way to testify to historical injustice. In fact, Wang's distinctive filmmaking has enabled him to turn this extensive collection of interviews into a cinematic experience bearing witness to hitherto unaccounted historical junctures. In particular, *Dead Souls* rescues collective memories of the Anti-Rightist Campaign that would otherwise soon disappear with the passing way of those who experienced it. In addition to the relevance of each individual narrative, Wang's emphasis on space helps put each individual witness into a larger mosaic. Filmed interviews thus compose and provide space for the viewers to reflect upon the contradictions imbued in the Chinese state system since an earlier stage of modern history, and upon the broader dynamics of historical events. A brief discussion of how Wang connects with but also moves away from the work that Claude Lanzmann did with his large documentary project *Shoah* (id. 1985) is also offered.

The fifth chapter expands on the interplay between collective spaces and individual narratives over the course of China's transformation. It testifies to Wang's concern for how individuals came to be exposed to social inequalities as the welfare system declined. After *Fengming, A Chinese Memoir* (*He Fengming*, 2007), focusing on the elderly lady's narrative of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the filmmaker has continued looking at individual stories as a way to zoom in on certain processes. In most cases, these individual narratives relate to a larger collective space that has been transformed or affected by top-down policies and economic changes. These intimate portraits of men and women by means of the camera bring to the fore the collective spaces against which they are singled out. This is the case of *Man With No Name* (*Wu ming zhe*, 2009), *Father and Sons* (*Fu yu zi*, 2014), and *Mrs Fang* together with the unfinished work *Mi Niang* (id. 2014) and *Beauty Lives in Freedom* (*Mei shi ziyou de xiangzhen*, 2018). It should be noted that many of these individual narratives are commissioned works and were first presented in art exhibition spaces together with photographic series or on the occasion of retrospectives and homages. They also help introduce the

diversity of Wang's output and how he has been able to connect to both the film festival and the art exhibition circuits.

The sixth and final chapter approaches Wang's work from the perspective of exhibition spaces. It looks at how his career has evolved and partly transformed certain festival exhibition practices. It also briefly examines the diverse modes of meaning-making of works exhibited at film festivals and art galleries. By discussing festival exhibition and the broader yet crucial question of how Wang's oeuvre resonates with the viewers in different spaces across the globe, I look at the virtuous circuit of his regular presence across film festivals and art exhibitions. In fact, film festivals have served the essential function of providing a prestigious platform from which his work could first travel at a time when their domestic visibility is not possible and theatrical release of art-house films or documentary films is limited in Europe like elsewhere. The screenings and awards in Venice (*The Ditch*, *Three Sisters*, *'Til Madness Do Us Part*, *Bitter Money*), Cannes (*Fengming*, *A Chinese Memoir*, *Dead Souls*), Berlin (first short version of *West of the Tracks* and *Ta'ang/De'ang*, 2016), and Locarno (*Mrs Fang*), among many others, have contributed to the confirmation of the importance of Wang's cinema internationally.

This has happened at a time when documentary cinema has gained more prominence for a set of reasons, including the greater accessibility of digital technologies and their rapid evolution in terms of image and sound quality. This has further contributed to the collapse of the divide between fiction and non-fiction works on a global scale. Against this global scenario involving the film industry, the diversification of production and distribution modes, not to mention the fact that most of the issues at stake in Wang's work are of global concern, Wang Bing has emerged as a filmmaker – auteur and artist – with the ability to develop a distinctive film language worth of worldwide appreciation.

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