



OFFICIAL SELECTION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

DEAD SOULS

A film by Wang Bing

An Icarus Films and Grasshopper Film Release

France/Switzerland – 2018 – 495 minutes – 1.85 – In Chinese with English subtitles

"Masterful, heart-wrenching, harrowing; this essential documentary is necessarily, unflinchingly grim; the cinematic equivalent of walking in the survivors' shoes, and a complex, challenging but crucial viewing experience that burrows its immense sorrows deep into the audience's bones. A Shoah of our time." —Screen Daily

"Explosive; Charting the origins, operations and outcomes of a far-flung Chinese labor camp in the late 1950s/early 1960s, the documentary offers affecting and harrowing accounts from those who survived the gulag. Thoroughly focused and tightly structured, it is an immensely perceptive piece about the history of China and its multitude of discontents." —The Hollywood Reporter

"A powerfully sobering and clear-eyed investigation that justifies its length through the gravity and presence of its testimony." —Variety

Icarus Films

32 Court Street, Floor 21
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 488-8900
<http://IcarusFilms.com>
mail@IcarusFilms.com

Grasshopper Film

12 East 32nd Street, Floor 4
New York, NY 10016
(845) 521-1912
<http://grasshopperfilm.com/>
info@GrasshopperFilm.com

SYNOPSIS

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 Jiabiangou 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.



EXCERPT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH WANG BING

Emmanuel Burdeau: *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 resulted in Dead Souls?*

WANG Bing: 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 me, many people know about it. We knew that there had been a repression, that a great number of persons had been sent to a re-education 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 this 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: "Minghsui, 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?

A 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 close 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 the organization of the testimonies come relate to what you have called "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 ¹² 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 a 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 become 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.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



Wang Bing has been a leading documentary filmmaker of the burgeoning independent documentary scene in China for the past decade. Acclaimed by critics and recognized as one of the most important Chinese artists and filmmakers of his time, his work has garnered awards and international praise at major film festivals. Born in Shaanxi, a province in central China in 1967, Wang first studied

photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art before studying cinematography at Beijing Film Academy. He began his career as an independent filmmaker in 1999. His directorial debut, *West of the Tracks*, was released in 2003. He has since made 11 documentaries, many of which have been released in theaters. His most recent North American releases are the acclaimed documentaries *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir***, *Bitter Money**, *Ta'ang** and *'Til Madness Do Us Part**.

*An Icarus Films Release

**A Grasshopper Film Release

FILM CREDITS

Film title: *Dead Souls*
Countries: France/Switzerland
Year: 2018
Total running time: 495 minutes
Aspect ratio: 1.85
Language: In Chinese with English subtitles

A film by: WANG BING
Produced by: SERGE LALOU, CAMILLE LAEMLÉ, LOUISE PRINCE and WANG BING
Co-produced by: JOSÉ MICHEL BUHLER and WANG YANG
Director of Photography: WANG BING
Additional Photography: SHAN XIAOHUI, SONG YANG and LIU XIANHUI
Editing: CATHERINE RASCON
Assisted by: XU BINGYUAN
Sound: RAPHAËL GIRARDOT, ADRIEN KESSLER
Translation & French Adaptation: PASCALE WEI-GUINOT
Artistic Advisors: ZHU ZHU and WU SHENFANG
Line Producer China: LIANG YING
Production Managers: MARTIN BERTIER, WANG DI AND LI ZHE

A production by LES FILMS D'ICI and CS PRODUCTIONS
In co-production with ADOK FILMS and ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA
With the participation of ARTE FRANCE, CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE and CINÉFORUM
With the support of LA LOTERIE ROMANDE, LA RÉGION ÎLE-DE-FRANCE and THE IDFA BERTHA FUND

Download images, press kit and more at
<http://bit.ly/IcarusFilmsPRESS>

An Icarus Films and Grasshopper Film Release