

# The Cinema of Wang Bing

Chinese Documentary between History and Labor

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# Introduction

The Chinese documentary filmmaker at the heart of this study is Wang Bing 王兵, who was born in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, in 1967. Associated with independent documentary filmmaking, Wang Bing's cinema offers a sustained political engagement with Chinese history (especially the Maoist period), the transformation of labor practices since the early 2000s, and the everyday life of the Chinese in all its multifaceted forms. The lives that Wang has documented over the past twenty years refract the challenges that China has faced as a nation and the uneven development and rising inequalities that invariably emerge when such large-scale societal changes happen over a brief period. Attending to the dispossessed and the marginalized, the documentarian has tirelessly investigated the legacy of China's Maoist past in the present and the country's spectacular economic growth in the twenty-first century, as well as its impact on labor practices and the workers themselves.

A significant portion of Wang's practice bears witness to the social impact that the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, better known as the "Reform-and-Opening" (*gaige kaifang*) era, have had on those who have not benefitted from the economic progress signaling China's rise to the rank of international superpower. The economic accomplishments of the last four decades have seen millions of Chinese lifted out of poverty because of the transition from the rural economic model based on collectivized farming, state-owned and collectively owned enterprises, and socialist planning to the market-oriented economic reform indicating the country's move toward privatization, corporatization, and foreign investment, culminating in China's accession to the WTO in 2001. China's "growth miracle" has been characterized as "the biggest, fastest, longest, and overall most dramatic transformation of an economy in history."<sup>1</sup> This unprecedented transition marked the end of the Maoist model of economic isolation that had been in place for decades and launched China's effort to modernize and implement a mixed economy combining socialism and capitalism. After forty years of wide-scale social and economic transformations at home and opening internationally, China has profoundly changed the face that it presents to the world.

Economists have noted that many have been in favor of the implementation of the “Reform-and-Opening” measures.<sup>2</sup> However, several of Wang Bing’s films have sought to show the other side of the coin of China’s rapid economic progress. Indeed, they document those dissatisfied with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s policies and what they have entailed for them. Those who have not benefitted from the reforms make up an important segment of the Chinese population whose experiences of the post-Reform era are not featured in the state-controlled media, and their living conditions certainly do not reflect the much-publicized increased standard of living. As many scholars have noted, there seem to be a number of rising inequalities in China’s post-socialist brand of neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> For example, the shift from public to private ownership has revealed one of the most alarming inequalities: “As a result, while in 1978 about 70 percent of national wealth was public and 30 percent private, in 2015 the proportions are reversed: 30 percent of national wealth is public and 70 percent private. China used to be a communist country and is now a mixed economy.”<sup>4</sup>

As many now realize, China’s economic success since 1978 has come at a price: rural unemployment, massive internal migration, environmental degradation, income disparities (the rural-urban divide), bureaucratic corruption, and Xi Jinping’s brand of authoritarian politics, among others, are only a few of the issues that the Chinese face today. Delisle and Goldstein provide a succinct account of the situation: “Wide disparities have emerged between prosperous coastal regions and a lagging interior, between cities and the countryside, and within urban areas that are home to the world’s first or second largest group of billionaires as well as recent migrants from the countryside who work in the informal economy and lack full access to China’s modest social safety net and other publicly provided goods.”<sup>5</sup> Reacting to the CCP’s quest to make China more prosperous and improve the living conditions of Chinese citizens, Wang Bing has focused on the silent majority whose socioeconomic future remains uncertain and has been ignored in mainstream media and official historical records. While millions of Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, countless others have yet to see the benefits of the reforms. They are the focus of Wang Bing’s cinema.

Whether it be the closing of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or migrant labor, Wang has relentlessly documented the darker side of China’s post-Reform era. An astute observer of contemporary China, the filmmaker has remarked on the reification process taking place on a national scale: “The economy has kidnapped every one of us. In this sense, human relations today are essentially economic relations.”<sup>6</sup> As opposed to those who are quick to celebrate the great changes that China has undergone, Wang wishes to qualify that transformation and underline its false nature: “we all hope for a big change, but I think that contemporary society does everything it can to prevent this change.”<sup>7</sup> In a rare hyperbolic statement, he has remarked that “China is living the most catastrophic period of its history.”<sup>8</sup> Such statements orient

this study of Wang Bing's cinema, which seeks to offer a fine-grained treatment of sociohistorical, political, economic, urban, cultural, and aesthetic issues by developing a *sociopoetics* of independent Chinese documentary. Given that the filmmaker's work reflects a profound engagement with what China has become since launching its campaign of openness and reform in 1978, I argue that it is crucial to pay closer attention to the variously interrelated social, historical, and economic issues that frame Wang's practice than has been the case so far.

Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu* 铁西区, 2003) first took the film-viewing public by storm by documenting yet-unseen spaces of labor in Shenyang, bearing witness to the end of SOEs in China and the uncertain fate of soon-to-be-unemployed workers.<sup>9</sup> Since then, Wang has documented the vestiges of the Great Leap Forward's famine years and Mao's Anti-Rightist Campaign through the words and life experiences of labor camp survivors in a thought-provoking trilogy (*Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* [*He Fengming* 和凤鸣, 2007]), *The Ditch* [*Jiabianguou* 夹边沟, 2010]), and *Dead Souls* [*Si linghun* 死灵魂, 2018]). Other notable films in Wang's oeuvre document coal industry workers (*Coal Money* [*Tongdao* 通道, 2008]), migrant workers in the textile industry (*Bitter Money* [*Ku qian* 哭钱, 2016]), abandoned children in the remote province of Yunnan (*Three Sisters* [*San zimei* 三姊妹, 2012]), psychiatric patients in a Yunnan asylum (*'Til Madness Do Us Part* [*Feng ai* 疯爱, 2014]), ethnic refugees fleeing civil war at the Myanmar-China border (*Ta'ang* [*De'ang* 德昂, 2016]), and the final days of a disabled woman (*Mrs. Fang* [*Fang Xiuying* 方绣英, 2017]). Wang has made films destined for the movie theater, and he has also created photographic series and video installations for art galleries and museums such as the fourteen-hour-long *Crude Oil* (*Caiyou riji* 菜油日记, 2008), *Man with No Name* (*Wumingzhe* 无名者, 2009), the one-take, fifteen-hour-long *15 Hours* (*15 xiaoshi* 小时, 2017), *Beauty Lives in Freedom* (*Mei shi ziyou de xiangzheng* 美是自由的象征, 2018), which focuses on Anti-Rightist Campaign survivor, artist, and author Gao Ertai,<sup>10</sup> and *Scenes: Glimpses from a Lockdown* (2020), a performative installation in which the artist combined film and live performance for the first time. At the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, Wang presented two works: the 61-minute portrait *Man in Black* (*Heiyi ren* 黑衣人, 2023), about Chinese composer Wang Xilin, and *Youth (Spring)* (*Qingchun* 青春, 2023), which is his most recent documentary on migrant labor.

Numerous screenings, awards, exhibitions, and retrospectives around the world have cemented Wang Bing's reputation as one of the most significant documentarians of his generation. His films have been screened and have received major awards at prestigious film festivals such as the Venice International Film Festival, the Berlin Film Festival, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and the Cannes Film Festival. His oeuvre has been the subject of major retrospectives at the Lincoln Center, the Museum of the Moving Image, the Harvard Film Archive, the Musée national d'Art moderne-Centre Georges-Pompidou, the Tate Modern,

the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique, the Museo Nacional Reina Sofía / Fílmoteca Española, and the Cinémathèque française, among others. His photographic series and video installations have been exhibited at art galleries in Paris, Zürich, Brussels, Geneva, and San Francisco, and at Documenta 14 in Kassel (2014) and Athens (2017). Wang Bing received the EYE Art & Film Prize (Amsterdam) for his body of work in 2017 and the CHANEL Next Prize in 2021.

In this book, I inquire into what it means for a filmmaker such as Wang Bing to take twenty-first-century China as an *object of cinematic thought*, and I attend to the audiovisual strategies used to represent his two obsessions: Maoist history and the evolution of labor practices in the twenty-first century, the latter having been described as the “very essence”<sup>11</sup> of Wang Bing’s cinema. I am therefore interested in how Wang understands cinema as an *object of historico-political thought* regarding the representation of both history and labor more specifically. Needless to say, historico-political subjectivity takes various forms within independent Chinese documentaries as they deconstruct and reconstruct history to create an “alternative archive” of lives and events, as Berry and Rofel have described it.<sup>12</sup> Wang Hui has claimed that the “political subjectivity (*zhengzhi zhutixing*) of New China was established on the basis of the foundation of its own historical activity.”<sup>13</sup> One hundred years later, I argue that Wang Bing makes documentaries that ground the historico-political subjectivity of twenty-first-century China in a sustained reflection on both the legacy of the Maoist era and Deng Xiaoping’s neoliberal reforms whose multifaceted impact on labor and workers have been felt quite dramatically since the 2000s. Pickowicz and Zhang aptly capture Wang Bing’s critical perspective when they state that twenty-first-century Chinese documentaries generally “stand in disquieting and jarring contradiction to a grand vision of China proudly marching forward as the world’s second largest economy, a one-dimensional notion that is being propagated everywhere in official and commercial media in China.”<sup>14</sup>

Building on the achievements of independent Chinese documentary scholarship, this monograph emphasizes the insightful role that social and economic histories can play in the close analysis of select films. For example, the analysis of Wang Bing’s “Anti-Rightist” trilogy, examined in Part One, greatly benefits from the thorough integration of social and oral histories of Maoist China to make sense of what happened during the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine. Similarly, the transformation of labor practices within twenty-first-century China at the heart of the documentaries analyzed in Part Two requires a profound understanding of SOEs and what led to their demise, the coal industry’s transportation issues, and the spatial and gender politics of migrant labor within the textile industry. This study of Wang Bing’s cinema seeks to demonstrate what is gained by more deeply contextualizing his practice and developing a sociopoetics of documentary film, which could be used to analyze the work of other Chinese documentarians.

## Situating a Documentary Practice

In the early 1990s, Wang Bing entered the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, where he majored in photography and took classes in literature, art history, and painting. Upon graduation in 1995, he would go on to study at the Beijing Film Academy in the Cinematography Department. That is where Wang first saw films by Antonioni, Bergman, and Godard, major influences he still cites to this day. In addition to Tarkovsky, whom he regularly mentions as his favorite filmmaker, Wang also acknowledges Visconti for having taught him how to combine shots and sequences to make films “in a non-traditional way.”<sup>15</sup> Noteworthy is that Wang had seen very few documentaries before he started making them. His first foray into documentary filmmaking was under the auspices of the state-run Production Studio for Information, Documentary, and Cinema (Xinwen Jilupian Dianying Zhipian Chang). At the time, Wang worked as a first assistant and director of photography on a state-produced documentary film about Zhou Enlai, who was Prime Minister of the Republic of China from 1949 to 1976, titled *Zhou Enlai wajiao fengyun* (The Diplomatic Charm of Zhou Enlai). Working on this documentary film allowed Wang Bing to have access to studio equipment, including a 35 mm camera, various cinema lenses, and 35 mm film, and get a sense of what film could accomplish as an artistic medium.

Describing the state studio as “the biggest communist propaganda machine,”<sup>16</sup> Wang soon felt dissatisfied creatively and reconsidered his career path after the Zhou Enlai documentary. In 1999, after a disastrous experience working on a fiction film, Wang decided to work independently. As he has stated numerous times, his documentaries have been shot without proper state authorization by the National Department of Radio, Cinema, and Television (Guojia Guangbo Dianying Dianshi Zongju), which approves the content of radio and television shows, as well as film scripts. Working independently of the studio system, Wang set out on a creative journey that would require his films to be funded by foreign bodies, which are mostly European in his case. To say that his work has been ostracized in China would be an understatement: his films have never been approved there and, therefore, cannot be shown publicly. On the screening of his films, Wang adds: “On the one hand, few spectators see my films because mainstream cinema occupies all the space. On the other hand, few spectators know of their existence because they are only available as pirate DVDs. One can thus say that in China my cinema doesn’t exist, at least on the surface.”<sup>17</sup> Wang’s comment points to the idiosyncratic case of a Chinese film practice that relies primarily on European funds to exist and whose audience is mainly Western.

Wang’s films have attracted a great deal of critical attention because of their stylistic choices, which are often associated with the notion of “slow cinema” within film studies. In various publications devoted to the Chinese filmmaker, authors



systematically mention the exceptional length of his films.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, most last several hours and make extreme demands on spectators. For example, Wang's first film, *West of the Tracks*, clocked in at over nine hours. Favoring the long take and exploring the potential of cinema to offer an immersive experience over several hours, Wang has capitalized on the notion of duration to challenge the traditional, formatted filmic experience with its predictable plot lines and character arcs. Alongside documentary filmmakers such as Claude Lanzmann and Patricio Guzmán, Wang has developed a practice in the *longue durée*, a crucial aspect of his films that is often related to the slow cinema movement.

The author of the first monograph on Wang Bing, French film scholar Antony Fiant has introduced the notion of "subtractive cinema"<sup>19</sup> (*cinéma soustractif*) to discuss films associated with "slow cinema" in anglophone scholarship. The distinction between a cinema of subtraction and a cinema of slowness is an important one. While subtraction concerns the elements that are no longer present or privileged, slowness has to do with the pace of the filmic experience. The distinction is even more important in the case of a cinema such as Wang's because the filmmaker himself has drawn attention to the fact that his films are not *slow* per se: "Actually, I think that my films are long, it's true, but not slow."<sup>20</sup> He adds: "It's not that I like to shoot very long films . . . If one chooses a subject that hasn't been treated before, one is obligated to take one's time to present it."<sup>21</sup> On the subject of *Dead Souls*, Wang remarks: "The reason for the 8 hours and 15 minutes lies in the subject, in a very rich content that would have made it impossible to make a short film."<sup>22</sup> Wang's comment echoes what Nichols has said of time in observational cinema: "Though observational films are rooted in the present, they also take time, and such recurrences heighten the impression of narrative development, of transformation over time, as opposed to the alternative impression of an atemporal slice of selected scenes from a single moment in time."<sup>23</sup> In sum, Wang takes issue with the supposed slowness of his films, arguing that there is a crucial difference between slowness, which has to do with pace, and length, which he associates with duration. This clarification should make slow cinema scholars rethink the relationship between Wang's films and the trend in international art cinema with which they have too hastily associated his work.

More crucial than the discussion around "slow cinema" in the description of his sociopoetics is the filmmaker's relationship to the history of the present, that is, life in the late 1980s, and how it profoundly marked him and set him on his creative path. Reflecting on the Tiananmen incidents of June 1989, Wang notes: "I grew up in a politically stable period. The student movement showed me there could exist a relationship between politics and society, that society could change . . . My commitment dates back to that time."<sup>24</sup> As Berry has remarked, the tragic events at Tiananmen have acted as a "crucial structuring absence"<sup>25</sup> for many Chinese documentarians. Although Wang has not dwelt on June 1989 that much in interviews, masterclasses,

influence of Frederick Wiseman's observational style on many independent filmmakers, considering the absence of voice-over narration, talking heads, and nondiegetic soundtrack. Rather, *xianchang* embraces the unpredictable and, by doing so, leads to ethical questions that only it could have generated: "*xianchang* becomes an ethical problem: narrative structures that make historical contingencies into necessities driven by a teleological vision of progress are rejected in favor of contingency and particularity."<sup>61</sup> The *xianchang* approach to documentary making reveals a complex practice combining aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical concerns that *minjian* filmmakers such as Wang Bing have confronted in reaction to post-Reform China.

Lü Xinyu has made a crucial intervention to reposition debates over *xianchang*,<sup>62</sup> as there seems to be critical fatigue with *de rigueur* discussions of *xianchang* within Chinese documentary studies. Braester explains: "The concept of *xianchang* no longer suffices to describe independent documentary in the twenty-first century. Lü's idea of self-ethics directs the conversation away from defining a profilmic subject—*diceng*, director, or otherwise—and notes how the director is transformed in the process of filming, most significantly as an ethical subject."<sup>63</sup> Braester goes on to argue that Wu Wenguang's notion of *xianchang*, that is, the documentation of an event at both the time and place of its occurrence, "ascribes to the filmmaker a relatively passive role. *Xianchang* takes both the filming and the filmed as givens, rather than focusing on the performative aspect of their interaction. Ethical engagement is of no explicit concern."<sup>64</sup> Noting that the "lack of self-reflection threatened to turn into self-indulgence"<sup>65</sup> within Chinese documentary practices, Braester welcomes the increasing attention paid to ethics in both Chinese documentary studies and filmmaking itself.

While Lü and Braester are correct to demand that greater attention be paid to the ethical stakes of documentary practices, I believe that in their accounts, the notion of "self-ethics" (*ziwo lunli*) remains undertheorized from a Western, Chinese, or global perspective. On the one hand, there is a crying need for more sustained engagements with the ethical stakes of *xianchang*, which is what Lü has implicitly proposed with the notion of self-ethics. On the other hand, while self-ethics may indeed "fill a glaring gap in theorizing documentary cinema in the early twenty-first century,"<sup>66</sup> the Chinese documentary filmmaker, as an ethical subject, deserves closer attention. If indeed Lü's notion of self-ethics emphasizes "the critical process taking place within the filmmaker's consciousness,"<sup>67</sup> then more needs to be said about that process. The following chapters closely examine how Wang Bing's filmmaking choices and process reflect his self-ethics and artistic criticality.

## Overview

This book is divided into two parts. Building on the foundation laid in the Introduction, Parts One and Two concentrate on the two obsessions at the heart

of Wang's films: Chinese history and labor. Part One, "The Labor of History," foregrounds the pain and exhaustion associated with the unfolding of historical events in Maoist China and turns to the collective trauma of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Great Famine (1959–1961) as documented in Wang Bing's "Anti-Rightist" trilogy (*Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*, *The Ditch*, and *Dead Souls*), which was inspired by the fictionalized testimonies in Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi*, 2002). More than a simple representation of past events and traumas, history is *put to work* in Wang Bing's films: it is asked to mediate and perform certain tasks to address the horrors of the Chinese past, especially the Maoist era, and the difficulty to remember. In the trilogy, the filmmaker confronts his country's historical amnesia and accomplishes the difficult task of historical rectification by creating an archive of his own.

In Part One, I show that, as a *minjian* filmmaker, Wang Bing engages the question of the archive in his own singular way with the resources of both documentary and fiction. Wang's "Anti-Rightist" trilogy functions as a fascinating case study for understanding the reconstruction of the Chinese past by audiovisual means in the context of unopened archives and the paucity of reliable documents. I argue that the filmmaker uses three distinct modes of archiving in the trilogy, each film addressing a specific issue pertaining to the creation of an archive. In the process of creating audiovisual archives for future generations, Wang Bing demonstrates how the oral history film and the fictionalized treatment of history need to walk the fine line between history and memory, on the one hand, and preservation and creation, on the other, with respect to archiving labor camp life and experiences.

In the first chapter, I draw on the work of social historians of China to contextualize the representation of survivors at the heart of Wang Bing's "Anti-Rightist" trilogy, which serves as a unique audiovisual archive of the legacy of Maoist China, especially the representation of the Great Leap Forward and the ravages of the famine of 1958–1962. Bridging the gap between social history and film studies, Chapter 1 seeks to provide a rich sociocultural background to Wang Bing's work. This introductory chapter reflects on the erasure of historical events in twentieth-century China such as the Great Famine and the role that documentary film can play. I pay special attention to forced labor and the prison camp (in both its *laogai* and *laojiao* forms) and touch on aspects of Chinese penology pertaining to Maoist camps such as Jiabiangou. Memoirs, microhistories, and scholarly studies mediate what remains of Maoist China and contextualize the films analyzed in subsequent chapters under the sign of oral history.

Chapter 2 examines the function of *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* as an oral history film focusing on a single female survivor, He Fengming. I argue that, in the process of documenting He's life experiences over three hours, the *minjian* filmmaker turns his subject into an embodied archive with a specific affective and performative charge. Equally significant in *Fengming* is the exploration of intertextual

resonances between three texts: He Fengming's published memoir, *Jingli: wo de 1957 nian*, Yang Xianhui's fictionalized account of the period in *Jiabiangou shiji*, and Wang's long-form interview with He herself in his 2007 film. These different media use three modes of archiving to retell a traumatic period in Chinese history. I show that one of the film's greatest contributions is to have implicitly challenged the binary opposition between oral testimony and archive in influential theories such as Paul Ricoeur's by emphasizing the primordial role of performance, affect, and trauma in what I describe as a nascent form of critical archive theory mediated by moving images.

The focus of Chapter 3 is on *The Ditch*, which is Wang Bing's only foray into feature-length fiction. I examine the second film in the "Anti-Rightist" trilogy and show how the recourse to fiction and reenactment raises important ethical issues about the representation of labor camp guards and survivors played by semi-professional and nonprofessional actors and about the recreation of the camps themselves. The chapter seeks to understand what kind of potential the *minjian* filmmaker saw in fiction to capture the experiences of the Great Famine that he had not explored before. I argue that the representational and ethical issues in the film depend on what I call "techniques of creative repetition," which correspond to how *adaptation* and *reenactment* allow for the creative repetition of past events and experiences. In the case of adaptation, the filmmaker returned to Yang Xianhui's fictionalized accounts, which appear in the collection discussed in the previous chapter on *Fengming*, and he used rare archival photographs of the camps to recreate the setting for his film. Finally, I draw on documentary scholars' writings on reenactment and Gilles Deleuze's reflections on repetition to argue that what Wang ultimately sought to accomplish in *The Ditch* was to find a new audiovisual strategy to represent historical events, and that the two techniques of creative repetition used in *The Ditch* make the spectator reconsider key moments in twentieth-century Chinese history concerning the horrors of labor camp life.

The last chapter of Part One, Chapter 4, turns to the third installment in the "Anti-Rightist" trilogy, *Dead Souls*, which focuses on the testimonies of several survivors of the Mingshui labor camp over eight hours. In this *film-fleuve*, which serves a decidedly archival purpose, Wang Bing alternates between long-form interviews with survivors and landscape sequences, aligning this film and the trilogy as a whole with the work of social historians who have emphasized the agency of survivors and the role of oral history to archive labor camp life experiences. Wang Bing's marked interest in the vivaciousness of the spoken word testifies to both his belief in the self-presence of the survivor in human form and the plastic nature of human memory as represented in the nonchronological treatment of the interviews. This chapter argues, perhaps most provocatively, that *Dead Souls* is equally interested in documenting *nonhuman* survivors, which take the form of remnants such as bones scattered across the land where the labor camps used to be. The nonhuman perspective of

the film has not received any critical attention, even though the landscape sequences function as crucial markers of critical distance for the *minjian* filmmaker, who uses them to pause from heart-wrenching interviews with survivors. Yet these landscape sequences are no mere transitional moments in the film: they allow the spectator to understand landscape as both a view and a site in terms of ontological, epistemological, and practical considerations.

Part Two, titled “The History of Labor,” turns to the second obsession at the heart of Wang Bing’s cinema: the representation of Chinese labor and its transformation in the twenty-first century. In addition to what is Wang’s most celebrated film, *West of the Tracks*, I examine works that have received less critical attention such as *Coal Money* and *Bitter Money*, and I assess how Wang Bing approaches the challenges faced by workers who have to find employment in other sectors such as the coal industry and textile manufacturing now that most SOEs are a thing of the past. As a *minjian* intellectual and artist, Wang Bing carefully documents the profound labor changes that China has undergone, going from the end of SOEs and its impact on Tiexi district in Shenyang to the predominance of migrant labor in coastal cities such as Huzhou.

Chapter 5 sets the stage for the study of *West of the Tracks*, *Coal Money*, and *Bitter Money* in Part Two. There are two central notions at the heart of this introductory chapter: Chinese governmentality and critical realism. Regarding the former, it is the transition from Maoist state planning to Chinese governmentality that signaled the transformation of worker identity in China. The new forms of societal organization under the sign of governmentality meant the adaptation of Western governmental practices to the Chinese context, which is to say understanding the enduring legacy of Maoism after the CCP turned to a mixed economy in its quest to transform the country. The CCP having vastly invested in the control of its population’s conduct since the 1950s, the management of life that is at the center of Part Two concerns the socioeconomic and political behavior of workers facing the closure of SOEs and its aftermath, the transportation of energy commodities within the coal industry, and the emergence of textile workshops and the widespread reliance on migrant labor in the garment industry. The transition from the safety net of the *danwei* system to the worker as an entrepreneur of the self who is responsible for finding solutions to socioeconomic problems such as unemployment is a major concern of this chapter, as many of Wang Bing’s subjects discuss how they can improve their living conditions.

The second concept at the heart of Chapter 5, critical realism, borrows from Allan Sekula’s publications and artistic projects that focus on labor. More than a visual style, critical realism is a documentary method first and foremost, which can help to rethink how the notion of observation has been defined within documentary studies. Privileging labor and workers as the focus of its investigation, the critical realist method takes the everyday conditions of workers and the impacts of neoliberalism as the locus of sociopolitical struggles within society. Inspired by Sekula’s

work, this study develops a finer-grained account of Chinese workers and their struggles, from the positivity of employment to the negativity of unemployment and all the contingent moments in-between, including visual moments imbued with idleness and uncertainty. The critical realist method, as a visual research method, thus departs from socialist realism's efforts to monumentalize the working body in the representation of labor, as was the case in socialist art and revolutionary realism, to emphasize the dialectical understanding of the worker in terms of precarity and exploitation. The concept of critical realism accounts for both Wang Bing's observational tactics and the documentary records of Chinese labor found in *West of the Tracks*, *Coal Money*, and *Bitter Money*.

Chapter 6 turns to Wang Bing's breakthrough epic, *West of the Tracks*, which was shot in Shenyang (Liaoning Province) in northeastern China. This nine-hour-long visual journey carefully documents the end of a gigantic industrial complex, Tiexi, and points to the end of SOEs as the CCP transformed the planned economy and transitioned to the hybrid economic model in place today. The chapter argues that Wang Bing's interest in Tiexi was to document a decaying social totality, focusing on three key aspects corresponding to the three parts in the film: the material state of the factories themselves and the financial and psychological state of workers facing impending unemployment ("Gongchang"); the impact of the closure of SOEs on a Tiexi neighborhood and its youths and the challenges of forced relocation ("Yanfen jie"); and finally, a microhistorical perspective on a father-son relationship under difficult financial circumstances ("Tielu"). Wang Bing's desire for a totalizing view of labor in *West of the Tracks* explains the emphasis on working life within SOEs, the documentation of community life in a Tiexi neighborhood facing demolition, and the socioeconomic challenges facing a poor family unit. I argue that it is imperative to analyze all three parts of the film as interrelated components in this cinematic portrait of a disintegrating social totality. The film combines both macrohistorical and microhistorical perspectives on Chinese labor and the impact of Chinese governmentality on the population of Tiexi to paint an unforgettable portrait of the "urban poor" after the dismantling of the *danwei* system.

In Chapter 7, I examine a neglected film in Wang Bing's oeuvre, *Coal Money*, which documents China's coal industry, more specifically the extraction and transportation of coal and the working lives of those who, we can imagine, used to find employment in the type of SOEs archived in *West of the Tracks*. The film offers a meditation on the real price of coal and the human costs associated with it in such precarious employment within the Chinese Anthropocene. I argue that *Coal Money* makes a singular contribution to the environmental documentary genre and the representation of Chinese labor because the film frames the coal-related production, transportation, and negotiation activities defining the conditions of workers. The treatment of coal as a *transportable* and *negotiable* commodity brings to light the precarious labor that comes with the *movement* of coal and *negotiation* of coal



prices. The chapter contextualizes this overlooked film by turning to the literature on the Chinese coal industry, highlighting some of the environmental challenges associated with the transportation of coal and analyzing how coal industry workers such as truck drivers and coal sellers are represented across various geographical areas and “minescapes.”

In the final chapter, the wheel comes full circle with Wang Bing’s *Bitter Money*, which addresses the current generation of rural migrant workers who move to the east coast to find employment in the textile and garment industry. While *West of the Tracks* marks the end of SOEs and a certain kind of social existence, *Coal Money* and *Bitter Money* make spectators reflect on the new industries that allow China to be a key player in a globalized world. Coming from provinces where jobs are scarce, the migrant workers in *Bitter Money* seek a better future in Zhejiang Province, where they hope to find employment in small family-run workshops, which is an under-represented aspect of the Chinese textile industry. Painting a picture of the changing labor conditions in twenty-first-century China, Wang Bing focuses on social issues that reveal the spatial politics of migrant labor: mobility, labor exploitation, the dormitory labor regime, migrant subjectivity, and domestic violence. Wang Bing’s unexpected focus on a struggling migrant couple and domestic violence in *Bitter Money* reflects a concern about female migrant subjectivity, gender, and power that had not been present to such an extent in his previous films.

## Notes

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## Observing the Workers

### Chinese Governmentality and Critical Realism

When Wang Bing was a photography student at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, in the early 1990s, he lived near a gigantic industrial district, Tiexi, that would become the subject of his first documentary film, *West of the Tracks* (2003). After working for more than three years as a cameraman in the film industry in Beijing, Wang decided to develop a personal film project that would take him back to a city where he spent a lot of time as a student. The filmmaker adds: “When I was a college student in Shenyang, I often went there to photograph at weekends. Its factories, its workers, and residents—I became very familiar with the place.”<sup>1</sup> *West of the Tracks* expresses Wang Bing’s fascination with Tiexi, and it adopts a critical perspective on the state of industry and labor in the context of the end of state-owned enterprises in an industrial district located in the capital of Liaoning. But it is not so much the changing industrial landscape that prompted Wang to document the place as “a feeling of desolation that reminded me of Tiexi District—the sense that a history which used to be important was now slowly declining, dissolving in front of our eyes.”<sup>2</sup> Committing to memory a significant period of Chinese industrial life thus functioned as the main impetus for the film that would launch Wang’s career on the international stage.

With *Coal Money* (*Tongdao*, 2008) and *Bitter Money* (*Ku qian*, 2016), Wang would pursue his obsession with Chinese labor and the fate of workers sustaining China’s economic boom, a variation on the theme first explored in *West of the Tracks*. A journey from Tianjin and Tanggu to the southern ports of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Zhejiang Province, *Coal Money* concerns natural resource extraction, the transportation of coal, and its status as a negotiable commodity in the Chinese Anthropocene. While *West of the Tracks* deals with the final years of heavy industry in Tiexi and documents a community of workers and where they live, *Bitter Money* zeroes in on the plight of migrant workers in the textile workshops and offers a close look at the employment and living conditions of migrant workers in Zhejiang Province. Wang Bing explains the changing nature of work within China now

that the government no longer maintains the social safety net associated with the *danwei* system: “Factories of the past still had a collective spirit. Workers’ lives were related to the factories. For instance, if you were a formal worker here, you would be considered part of the ownership of the workplace. Likewise, people’s daily life was closely related to their work relation at the factory. That is no longer the case for production units today—now there is a contract-labour system everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> Noting the precarious status of temporary workers, Wang associates the rise of the Chinese precariat with loss of community and dependence on the state, which was a hallmark of the socialist production system for decades. For Wang, the goal was “to talk about the Chinese economy, to see what it is: from the small businessman to the big enterprises, all at the same time.”<sup>4</sup> He adds: “What’s important today is to see what people are doing to China. If we don’t see this, we see nothing. When we look at China, we see only the economy, but without seeing what lies behind it, what people are really doing.”<sup>5</sup> *West of the Tracks*, *Coal Money*, and *Bitter Money* function as a tripartite endeavor to show what labor has become in China since the economic reforms.

This chapter introduces the socioeconomic and governmental issues at the heart of Part Two of this study, as well as the description of the critical visual approach that Wang Bing uses to make sense of the development of labor practices within China. First, I contextualize Wang’s history of Chinese labor in the twenty-first century by addressing the transition from Maoist state planning to Chinese governmentality, which is to say the transition from state socialism to a technology of government inspired by Western governmentality but adapted to the Chinese context. Second, I describe the observational method that Wang Bing has developed to document the evolution of Chinese labor and workers drawing on Allan Sekula’s concept of “critical realism.” I argue that these two elements—Chinese governmentality and critical realism—lay the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of a documentary practice taking Chinese labor and the fate of workers in the twenty-first century as its main object of study. While the three films at the heart of Part Two do not constitute a trilogy per se, they certainly reflect some of the most dramatic changes in the history of Chinese labor, ranging from the dismantling of state-run industry in the late 1990s to the emergence of coastal factories and the unprotected migrant worker. In more ways than one, Wang Bing’s labor films echo Lukács’ famous claim in *History and Class Consciousness* that “the fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole.”<sup>6</sup>

### From Maoist State Planning to Chinese Governmentality

The history of the working class in China under CCP rule offers fascinating insights into how the regime has dealt with the development of worker subjectivity and labor struggles. After all, for decades the regime had insisted that its workers were the

masters of the workplace and owned the means of production. The fact of the matter is that Chinese workers did not enjoy much control over their working lives and did not participate in the decision-making process. This became abundantly clear in the 1990s when came the time to dismantle state-owned enterprises. Sheehan writes: “Unrest among Chinese workers, including strikes and attempts to organize independent unions, has continued since 1989, and among state workers levels of unrest have risen sharply towards the end of the 1990s. The plans outlined at the Fifteenth Party Congress in September 1997 to allow most SOEs [state-owned enterprises] to be sold off, merge, or go bankrupt, will only increase unrest.”<sup>7</sup> What Sheehan had predicted is very well captured in Wang Bing’s *West of the Tracks*, in which the soon-to-be-laid-off workers were the last to learn about forthcoming factory closures, and their collective surprise at the very thought of being “unemployed permanent workers” in the socialist mode of production revealed their status as mere cogs in the machine rather than agents of their professional destiny. Contrary to what one might think about the socialist labor environment, the relations between the CCP and the workers have always been fraught, as historians of Chinese labor have shown. With China’s transition to the market economy, pressures on both leaders and workers exacerbated contradictions to the extreme.

Twenty years after the liquidation of SOEs, China has become the workshop of the world, and few would remember the struggles of laid-off workers were it not for a documentary such as Wang Bing’s *West of the Tracks*. Hurst reports that between 1993 and 2006, more than 60 million jobs were lost in SOEs and collective sector enterprises alone, which “represented a net downsizing of more than 40 percent of formal sector urban jobs over less than 15 years.”<sup>8</sup> What is the meaning of the socialist model of production and worker protection under these circumstances? Was it realistic to expect that the great majority of these workers would gain employment in the private sector thereafter? Clearly, the *danwei* system that provided housing, food, education, and health care to state workers—often referred to as the “iron rice bowl” employment system that was the hallmark of Chinese labor practices—was a thing of the past, and the role of workers would have to be redefined as they transitioned from the urban social life they were used to under the socialist regime to being private-sector employees in the newly arisen factories where precarity and the absence of benefits are the norm.

Wang Bing’s *West of the Tracks* documents the deterioration of working-class identity in the largest industrial district in Shenyang. The downfall of large heavy industrial firms under the supervision of the state actually led to the redefinition of working-class identity in China. Hurst notes: “Working class society is a three-dimensional concept encompassing class identity (i.e., workers’ views of themselves as members of a working class), the structure of workers’ social ties, and popular perceptions of the Maoist past.”<sup>9</sup> Based on the decision to transform SOEs into profit-seeking firms, laying off workers became a priority to ease the transition, no

matter the human cost. Self-employment and entrepreneurship would come to occupy center stage in the CCP's post-socialist dream. That is not to say that the transition has been an easy one: "As the Communist Party withdrew from its old role of working-class vanguard, SOE workers were abandoned by their political champion and revolutionary master. Not only did the working class become less able to act meaningfully in its own interest; it also lost the puppeteer that had so successfully pulled its strings on the political stage for nearly eight decades."<sup>10</sup> It is this long-cherished identity that the Chinese government would target as it developed new forms of societal organization under the sign of governmentality.

Introduced by Michel Foucault in the late 1970s, the notion of "governmentality" refers to the radical reconceptualization of both power and government as previously imagined within social and political science circles. Foucault defined governmentality as "[t]he ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security."<sup>11</sup> Often characterized as the shift from "government" to "governance" in the form of the "conduct of conduct," governmentality departs from the traditional application and maintenance of the state's power and the preservation of control to accentuate "the diversity of forces and knowledges involved in efforts to regulate the lives of individuals, and the conditions within national territories, in pursuit of various goals. In doing so, it suggests that government is neither operationalized nor exercised strictly through prohibitions and controls."<sup>12</sup> Governmentality embodies an apparently decentered, flexible approach to how populations should be managed within neoliberal societies because of the gradual decline of the welfare state and socialism in the West.

The changing conception of governance associated with Foucault's notion of governmentality echoes recent theorizations of citizenship that have become intertwined with issues or problems relating to population, the body, and life itself, which reflect the concerns of "biopower" and "biopolitics," that is, the cultivation and preservation of the various aspects of biological life such as population, fertility rates, birth planning, public health, disease, life expectancy, and sexuality as the central end of government. In Western democracies, the management of life in all its forms (biological, social, public, economic, and political) has become the focus of governmental efforts, and the COVID-19 pandemic can only be said to have exacerbated this situation. Citizens are now seen as consumers whose life choices, desires, and skills form the locus of governmentality and biopolitics. They are "entrepreneurs of the self" whose task it is to find solutions to socioeconomic problems such as unemployment that the state itself often creates because of shortsighted, profit-driven agendas. One of the advantages of turning to Foucault's understanding of governmentality is to have forced a long-overdue reconsideration of the categories

that have governed political science, such as the state, the subject, the public, and the private, among others, to better explain how power and control are exercised in neoliberal democracies.

Writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Foucault's analysis of governmentality targeted Western Europe first and foremost, with the occasional glance at the United States. Numerous scholars have discussed how Foucault's framework could be extended to non-Western or non-democratic forms of governance. It has been argued that alternative spheres of political influence and control such as China could be said to function as Foucault's blind spot in his admittedly Eurocentric perspective, a point Greenhalgh and Winckler emphasize when stating that "Foucault's analysis is Eurocentric and needs to be amended to include alternative modes of biopolitical differentiation and 'improvement.'"<sup>13</sup> A country such as China poses a great challenge to the Foucauldian understanding of governmentality, being an authoritarian regime that does not place an exorbitant value on individual choices and freedom the way liberal democracies do and that has put equal emphasis on the biopolitical management of the quantity and quality of its population. As Jeffreys and Sigley note: "the focus on advanced liberal democracies overlooks the possibility of non-liberal forms of governmentality, in this instance a socialist arts of government or Chinese governmentality, which governs not through familiar tactics of 'freedom and liberty', but rather through a distinct planning and administrative rationality, and which is nonetheless a product of the same processes that Foucault partly outlines in the governmentality lecture."<sup>14</sup>

Dutton and Hindess have described how governmentality functions within the Chinese context: "governmentality in China can be seen as the outcome of a history that is radically different from the one that Foucault traced in the western context. Governmentality, with Chinese characteristics, belongs to the legacy of Maoism. It is part of what remains after Mao's grand projects were abandoned and the CCP directed its attention towards the economy . . . Maoism, in being centrally concerned with the transformation of everyday life, that is, with the wives and children, households, and (former) 'slaves' of the now 'liberated' China, made the government of these domains central to its mode of rule."<sup>15</sup> It is no wonder that *minjian* Chinese filmmakers, starting in the early 1990s, decided to make of the everyday their central focus as they went about reinventing how documentary filmmaking could relate to activism, witnessing, and invisibility in a changing China.

As a result of China's societal reforms and entry into the world market economy, scholars have observed that, as a non-Western country, China presents a fascinating case study for those interested in how a Western concept such as governmentality can be applied to a political regime that has undergone seismic changes since the late 1970s. Dutton and Hindess explain: "Unlike Maoism, market-based modernization programmes run through, between and sometimes away from the state, rather than being generated out of it. As market forces took hold, the dictatorial, total and



## Conclusion

This monograph on Wang Bing's cinema has explored the two major obsessions at the heart of the Chinese documentarian's oeuvre, Maoist history and post-Reform labor practices, which reflect the bipartite division of this book. Its origins lie in my fascination with Wang's cinema, a thought-provoking practice that I have closely watched expand over the past twenty years and gain worldwide recognition. Keeping up with the secondary literature on Wang Bing over the years, I strongly believed that Wang Bing's cinema deserved a finer-grained treatment of its two main foci, and that another monograph on Wang Bing offering an overview of his career was unnecessary. What I imagined was treating Wang Bing as a *minjian* intellectual and artist whose two obsessions could serve as the foundation for investigating the labor of history, on the one hand, and the history of labor, on the other, in post-Reform China. Such a publication could help to reframe investigations into a single documentarian without having recourse to the tropes of auteur theory.

This study of Wang Bing's cinema has helped to enrich the study of contemporary Chinese documentary in several ways. The fundamental implications of this monograph concern the field of Chinese documentary studies first and foremost, but its conceptual and methodological contributions could extend into other fields within the visual arts and the humanities. In addition to the fine studies of independent Chinese documentary in our possession, this monograph has attempted to bridge the gap between social and economic history and film analysis in the form of a more focused examination of a single filmmaker. Indeed, it soon became apparent that paying justice to Wang Bing's "Anti-Rightist" trilogy would require a sustained look at social and oral histories of Maoist China before examining the films themselves. Similarly, the transformation of labor practices within twenty-first-century China would necessitate a closer analysis of the end of SOEs, the coal industry's transportation issues, and migrant labor within the textile industry, before analyzing the three films in Part Two. While I do not claim to have provided a systematic theoretical model in this study of one Chinese documentarian, I believe to have demonstrated the benefits of better contextualizing a practice such as Wang Bing's and developing both a sociopoetics of documentary film and an innovative



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