



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
COMPETITION
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

YOUTH (SPRING)

by Wang Bing



HOUSE ON FIRE, GLADYS GLOVER & CS PRODUCTION
PRESENT



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a film by Wang Bing

▷ *INTERNATIONAL PRESS*

RENDEZ-VOUS

Viviana Andriani

viviana@rv-press.com

06 80 16 81 39

Aurélie Dard

aurelie@rv-press.com

06 77 04 52 20

▷ *INTERNATIONAL SALES*

PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL

32 rue de l'Échiquier, 75010 Paris

01 42 96 01 01

IN PARIS: (+33) 1 42 96 02 20

IN CANNES: RIVIERA L3

Agathe Mauruc: amauruc@pyramidefilms.com

Marine Dorville: mdorville@pyramidefilms.com

Alberto Alvarez Aguilera: alberto@pyramidefilms.com

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Zhili, 150 km from Shanghai. In this city dedicated to textile manufacturing, young workers come from all the rural regions crossed by the Yangtze River. They are in their early twenties, share dormitories and snack in the corridors. They work tirelessly to be able one day to raise a child, buy a house or set up their own workshop. Between them, friendships and love affairs are made and unmade according to the seasons, bankruptcies and family pressures.

A conversation with WANG BING

YOUTH has been some years in the making, and “Spring” is only the first part. What did you first set out to do, and how did the film blossom into a grand saga?

My career as a film-maker began with *West of the Tracks*, which I shot in a giant industrial complex in China’s North-East. From there I moved on to the North-West, with *The Ditch*, then to Yunnan, in the South-West, for *Three Sisters*. After that I started thinking about doing something in the area around Shanghai, but I didn’t have anything well defined in mind. Some of the kids I’d met while filming *Bitter Money* pointed me towards Zhili City, a hub for the garment industry. That was the first time I really traveled around the Yangtze Delta and the whole Shanghai hinterland. I was curious to learn more about its unique character, and I started filming some of the scenes that you can see in this first part of *Youth*. But there were a lot of obstacles; I’m from the North, I didn’t understand their dialects, and it was hard to make any real contact. Everything was different, the way people lived, how they related and interacted. I soon realized it would take me much longer than on previous occasions to get to a point where I could make a documentary. So I found a place near Shanghai and moved there.

Arriving as a complete stranger in Zhili, I found a checkerboard of streets honeycombed with small garment-making workshops. But I had friends only 60 km away in the historic town of Suzhou, one of whom, a poet, introduced me to some people from Zhili, including workshop managers. One contact led to another, and pretty soon I had the run of the place. I could wander in and out of the factories and dormitory blocks without anyone stopping me or asking me what I was doing there. I never counted the streets, but there are around 20,000 workshops in that one town. Initially I hadn’t even thought about how many weeks or months of shooting I would need, or how long the film would be. I had enough money to cover six months’ work, but what I found was so intense that I ended up filming there over several years, from 2014 to 2019, amassing 2600 hours of rushes capturing the working lives of a huge cast of characters. In 2018 we started sorting this material, and in the spring of 2019, I decided I had shot enough and the time had come to begin editing. Then Covid hit, and everything stopped, so it wasn’t until 2021, when I came back to Paris, that I was able to start seriously working on the film.

Although I didn’t yet have any clear idea of what sort of film I was going to make, I did know, as early as



2015, that it would focus on Zhili and radiate out from there. I also wanted to travel back with my characters to their home towns and villages, either filming them or just on vacation, which meant traveling up to two thousand kilometers upriver. It was on those trips that I really began to understand life in the Yangtze basin and among the people living on its banks. The film took years to make not just because I shot so much, but also because I needed time to understand the spirit and lifestyles of a region that was foreign to me.

This first part is set entirely in Zhili City and ends with the return of a few of the characters to their village. Did you also go for unity of time?

The textile and garment market is seasonal. Typically, production pauses or stops outright between the end of February and June, and then resumes in July. It's a bit like the two semesters of a school year. Initially, we

therefore shot from September 2014 to June 2015. The last segment of this first part corresponds to the end of the season, when workers go back home.

Does all textile production in China follow the pattern we see in Zhili, or are there any local specificities?

Before arriving in Zhili, I had visited other garment manufacturing areas in the Yangtze Delta. The size and organization of the workshops varies quite widely, from huge factories to small units and even people working individually at home. In Suzhou, for example, they mainly have these enormous factories with ultra-tight surveillance, where you clearly can't film. Zhili is on a comparable scale – 300,000 migrant workers come to work there each year – but production is scattered among thousands of small units, individual or family businesses, all of which are self-managed. This means that control and surveillance are also fragmented, making access much easier for a documentary filmmaker.

What is it like in these workshops?

In terms of general mood, they are all very similar. These are private firms; the working hours are extremely long, from 8 am to 11 pm, with two breaks of an hour each for lunch and dinner. Otherwise, it's just long hours of work. Workers' wages are computed on a piece-rate basis, and paid out every six months. The problem is you start making a particular item of clothing without knowing how much each item is going to be paid, that's something you only find out at the end. In other words, there's no way of knowing what you'll get at the end of the season.

Most importantly, however, this industry, especially in Zhili, is not funded by the State, but entirely by private individuals through partnerships and mutual support: in other words, it has its roots in the people, unlike most of the Chinese economy. So it's really worth studying. In most places, to start a business you need capital, plant and a workforce, you have to pay corporate and local administrative taxes, and so on. Not in Zhili: here you can set up your business in a day. In the morning, you find a workshop, sign a lease on the spot and put up a sign offering work for fifteen machine operators. Everything else you need – machines, materials, fabric – is locally available. Buyers come to your door, and by evening, your finished product can be bundled and shipped out by special convoy to the four corners of China.

This industry's focus is garment production, but it generates a whole range of other activities, such as transportation, cleaning, maintenance. Until quite recently, the Chinese economy was entirely state-run. Zhili is an example of private enterprise that has vastly expanded, generating its own fascinating sociology. There are forms of primitive organization there that are reminiscent of ancient tribes, with social and economic interactions that can seem quite archaic. In most parts of the world, if you want to go into business, you need to go through the banking system. In Zhili they hardly need banks: trading is based on trust and reputation. Let's say I'm a business owner and I want to make clothes, and you sell fabric. The problem is, I don't yet have the money to buy this fabric from you. In a typical modern economy, I would need to get a bank loan. Not in Zhili: I don't give you a cent, but you let me

have the fabric on a deferred payment basis, I start producing the garments and I don't pay my workers for another six months. And the same goes for my client, who initially doesn't settle his whole bill, but just a percentage of it, paying me the rest of what he owes once he has sold all the goods, at which point I can pay you back for the fabric you let me have. The whole system operates on this general principle.

What happens if there's a weak link, if someone defaults?

That happens, of course, but it's relatively rare. According to the data, there are 20,000 business owners in Zhili, and in any given year around 400 run off with the money. That's 2%, not enough to bring down the whole system. This archaic set-up doesn't exist anywhere else in China, where the other economic sectors are entirely controlled by the State.

How do you explain the emergence and growth of this system?

Zhili specializes in children's clothes for the domestic market, 80-90% of which is supplied by the city's workshops. Quality standards are looser for children's clothes and styles change fast. Small, nimble units are therefore better suited to meeting this kind of demand than the mass production lines of large garment factories. With so many small production units in Zhili, some can specialize in particular items or styles. Sociologically and anthropologically, it's a fascinating ecosystem, a kind of micro-society outside the financial mainstream where human relationships have developed very differently. Anyone can start a business with a fairly small initial outlay. In each unit, workers and managers may be exhausted, but they

all have a stake in the success of the business. So this is a system where even the poorest can find a place. In a national economy completely controlled by the State and the banks, this type of experiment offers a glimmer of hope or, at the very least, an idea as to a possible way forward. And it's also in the best interest of local government to keep the system going, as it's a powerful magnet for jobs and industry. I know of no other place in China where that's possible.

How could the central government not see this "utopian" model as a threat?

It may well be tolerated only because it's contained and unique to this industry. What I've described also reflects a fundamental difference between two economies, in China's North and South. For centuries the Lower Yangtze has been the most highly developed region of China in terms of its trading and commercial culture. That's what drew me to learn more about the region, its forms of organization and its poetic, literary and aesthetic heritage.

Can you tell us a bit more about the sociology of the Zhili workers? How do they end up in Zhili?

Often whole families - husband, wife, and offspring if old enough to work - travel to Zhili and work together in the same factory. Or a whole group may come, all from the same village; you might find a brother and sister, their parents, and seven or eight of their neighbours all in the same small workshop. The average unit has under 20 workers. Some villages send a lot of workers, some only a few. I didn't focus on that in the first part of the film, but it becomes clear later when we go upriver to visit the Zhili workers in their home villages in Anhui or Yunnan.



Would you say the life of these young people in Zhili is representative of the whole country?

Migrant work has been a nationwide phenomenon since the 1990s. The Zhili economy may be atypical, but the lives of these young migrant workers are the same everywhere. They leave home in the spring and head for a big city like Guangzhou or Shanghai to find work, then return the following winter to spend Chinese New Year with their families. That's pretty much the only time in the year when they're sure to be home. While they're away working, no-one's left in these areas but older people and children; the adults of working age, say 18 to 40, are all in the big cities. But with Covid, things began to change. As jobs became scarcer in the main industrial centers, many potential migrants decided to stay home. This marks the start of a new and still uncertain phase in the country's development.

How does residence status affect the lives of the workers you filmed?

It's key to understanding their situation. Residence restrictions have existed in China in different forms throughout history, but they were officialized and generalized by the party when the People's Republic was founded in 1949. When I was a child, the residence regime was enforced very strictly. It means you cannot move freely to a town or even a neighbourhood other than the one where you are registered. You may of course take a holiday, or visit friends, but you can't move house without the government's permission, which requires completing a long series of complicated formalities. The residence laws therefore confine citizens within a certain radius. At the beginning of the first episode of *Youth*, Shengnan is pregnant. She's an only child and her parents don't want her to leave the family home and take up residence with her husband, they would much rather he moved to their district. Marriage is still the only change of status that allows a change of residence. However, Shengnan's boyfriend Zuguo is also an only child, so his mother wants to keep him in their family, as they have neither a pension nor health insurance, and a strong young man who can earn his living can no longer support his parents if he goes to live with his wife's family. This puts the two families at odds, as each of them wants the future groom for themselves.

Obviously, this problem is a direct consequence of the one-child policy that was so strictly enforced in the 1980s and 90s. Residence laws clash with the interests of one-child families: whenever two only-children want to get married, one of the households

loses out. The State decides what you are permitted to eat, buy or produce. If you change residence when you marry, you no longer belong to your family, but become part of your spouse's.

With this system, how can people work away from home for months on end?

They can leave their villages for work, but only by agreeing to do without essential services, like subsidized healthcare and medication, or access to schools, all of which are subject to local residence registration. This is why the children get left behind, in the villages. And yet, the authorities are still encouraging everyone to go and work in the big cities. There are glaring contradictions within the system, as factories require workers.

Some scenes give the film a surprisingly light and cheerful flavour: the custard pie fight in the dormitory, or the constant flirting interrupted by the soundtrack of sewing machines... Were you tempted – or perhaps it was your characters – to inject a dose of fiction into this documentary?

If some scenes look like slapstick or romantic comedy, it's just due to the lives my characters lead. I never interfere in their lives or try to direct them in any way. That's how I see a documentary film: it has to assert reality, tell the truth about people's everyday lives. These kids are at work nearly every minute of the day. To cheat these long working hours, they constantly play, flirt, pick fights, argue, horse around. They basically have no time off to rest, and they're not allowed to leave the workplace. So they play music very loud, joke, flirt, squabble, call each other

names, or make up games, just to kill time and keep themselves alert. That's their way of dealing with the situation, of making it more bearable.

And on one of the rare times they can get away, they go and crash in an internet café...

Only the youngest have any energy left to go to internet cafés, and they still have to start early the next day. You don't see the older workers going out at night. They spend their time figuring out how many pieces they can turn out in a day, and how much they can earn. Clocking off at 11 pm barely leaves them time to grab some food before going to bed. Most of them only get one day off a week, and in most cases it's not even that, they're simply allowed to clock off at 5 pm.

The film seems to unfold as a sequence of 20-minute episodes. Why did you choose to edit it this way?

I had to find a balance between the multiple workshops and the various groups of workers, who were sometimes very far apart. I couldn't edit five minutes from one location, then five minutes from another, the end result would have been far too disjointed. So I decided to construct segments of around 20 minutes, each one set in one location and open to a follow-up. The first part of the film has nine such segments, the last one a bit longer, when Xiao Wei leaves Zhili and heads back home to the country. This seemed the best way to avoid too chaotic an edit, while keeping a balance between the different locations. Formally, it's simpler and more natural. Sometimes, very intense things do happen, but they

are concentrated in a few minutes, sometimes even in a few short exchanges.

One of the things I'm happiest with in this film is the sparseness of the narrative. In each story, a few words are enough to capture the character's defining feature, and then the story moves on. On the surface it looks as if life is just unfolding naturally, with no big tragedies, no big dramas; but then you notice this very strong undertow. And when you look closely at what's at stake for each individual character, and you add up all these lives, you realize that under the casual banter, we're seeing the destiny of a whole generation in the balance.

Film and traditional narratives often seem to pick an individual out of the multitude of lives around us, like one fish out of the sea, and turn this person into a hero meant to stand for the world. I didn't want that spotlight effect. I prefer to see all these characters swimming together in the ocean of everyday life, and try to capture something in each of them to suggest the personal difficulties they're facing and the essence of their individual story. All these workers are living out their lives, often passively, but silently, without comment.

I also wanted to make a film out of independent, self-contained modules, that would allow viewers to make their own connections and build their own narrative, rather than foregrounding any one character.

Wang Bing in conversation with Antoine Thirion, April 17, 2023.

FALLING IN LOVE AT THE WORKSHOP

Wang Bing and the new generation of migrant workers in China's garment industry

After his masterly treatments of the world of work in North and North-East China (*West of the Tracks* 2002, *Crude Oil* 2008), followed by memoirs of the Anti-Rightist labour camps under Maoism (*Fengming* 2007, *The Ditch* 2008, *Dead Souls* 2018), Wang Bing continues his voyage of exploration in the small garment-making workshops of the east coast. The first brushstrokes of this new fresco had already been applied in *Bitter Money* (2016), which followed two teenage girls, first met while shooting *Three Sisters* (2012), as they made their way downriver to find work making clothes. It was on that shoot that Wang Bing discovered the city of Huzhou, where *Youth* is also set. Located 200 kilometers from Shanghai in the coastal province of Zhejiang, Huzhou was then home to 18,000 small private-sector garment workshops employing 300,000 seasonal migrant workers. Often referred to as “worker peasants” or the “floating” population, these workers hail mostly from poor areas in China's interior. Settling in the city is not an option, since their rural residence status¹ denies them access to the rights enjoyed by town-dwellers, such as health insurance, a pension, or schooling for their children. For them, therefore, a temporary job in a factory or seasonal work in the garment workshops are a way of earning money quickly before heading back to their home village.

Youth is centered on the town of Zhili, where we follow Wang Bing from one workshop to another and meet young migrants from the nearby provinces of Anhui and Henan. Zhili is well known for its children's clothes, accounting for two-thirds of domestic production, and the town is one of the many new garment-industry clusters dotting the South-East, just like Shaxi, in Guangdong, which specializes in sportswear. Yet in the early 1980s, Zhili was still just another poor village. The first small firms that blossomed there after Mao's death made mostly embroidered fabrics, for which the town was famous before communism. Then in the late 80s, a new class of visionary small-scale entrepreneurs saw the potential of an upcoming generation of “little emperors” - a result of the one-child policy - and seized the opportunity offered by cheaper access to sewing machines to start mass-producing children's clothes. The sector took off with the second wave of economic reforms in the 1990s, and today Zhili produces 1.45 billion items of children clothing per year.

The aptly named *Bitter Money* (2016) showed the daily existence of workers laboring under repetitive tasks, boredom, domestic violence, alcohol and Ponzi scams; but *Youth* gives these workshops a much fresher look, as reflected in the film's Chinese

¹ The household registration (or *hukou*, pronounced 'who-co') system, consolidated in 1958, created an administrative distinction between 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural' residence status, thus largely blocking intercity mobility and a rural exodus. While economic reform did not abolish this system, more flexible rules and a weakening of the State monopoly on labor helped to facilitate the mobility of temporary workers. In 2011, China's east coast attracted 72% of the country's migrant workforce..

subtitle *Chun*, which connotes youth as well as springtime. Wang Bing trains his camera on several different groups of young male and female workers, children of the 90s and now barely out of their teens, many of whom have come to Zhili with their parents or fellow-villagers.

This focus on young people reveals a new generation of migrant workers with a lifestyle and work attitudes quite different from those of their elders, who were socialized under Mao and are typically more attached to land, work, thrift and family. In that first wave, the average villager set out to find work in the city at 33; these “second-generation” migrant workers head out much earlier: typically, among those born in the 1990s, at 17. Better educated than their elders (29% have completed secondary school, compared to only 16% of their parents), they have looser ties to the land and closer affinities to urban life, as amply evidenced by the smartphones, and the talk of TV shows, online buying, fashion and music that run through the whole film.

If their elders were driven to leave their villages by sheer need, these young migrants have other, novel aspirations (“What’s more important, friends or work?”, one of them asks). Less inclined than their parents to work in construction, they prefer the garment or service sectors. Also, small-scale workshops like Zhili offer a degree of freedom, very different from the megafactories employing thousands where life is regulated on near-military lines, with strict controls on dress-codes, work tempos and male-female relationships. Here, you can listen to music while you work, chat, swear, argue,

have a scuffle or a tickle, take breaks, drift between dormitories, and maybe even fall in love for the very first time (a sometimes risky proposition as sex is still more or less taboo, and contraception virtually unknown.)

Although these young workers still feel the pressure of social norms, particularly with regard to the choice of a spouse, the workshops do afford them a space to experiment and learn about love and the rights they may have, a cause to which this younger generation often seem more sensitive than the one before. Although the small entrepreneurs they work for are often unscrupulous, and working conditions can be harsh, the workplace still offers a setting where the standards for what is considered a fair wage and a job well done can to some extent be weighed, debated, negotiated and referred to the judgment and good sense of the whole community without anybody running any major risk of reprisal. This relative latitude surely holds out some promise in the context of the ever-narrowing public sphere in the Xi Jinping era.

Justine Rochot
Sociologist, China specialist
Postdoc researcher at Academia Sinica (Taiwan)

DIRECTOR'S Biography

WANG Bing was born in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, in 1967. He studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang, an industrial city where, years later, he would film *West of the Tracks*. From there he moved on to the Beijing Film Academy, where he discovered the work of Antonioni, Bergman and Pasolini. He especially admires Andrei Tarkovsky. Through the 1990s he made a living working on various films as assistant director or cameraman, but, feeling that the mainstream filmmaking and television world would not let him develop as he wished, he decided to start producing his own films. In 2002 he made *West of the Tracks*, a nine-hour documentary about the decline of a vast industrial zone in North-East China. A first five-hour version was screened at the Berlinale in 2003. The final version, in three parts, premiered at the Rotterdam Film Festival and was distributed in France in 2004. Today, the film is considered both a masterpiece and a harbinger of the new possibilities opened up by the digital era. Since then, he has continued to work in the same mode, outside the system and always on highly challenging topics, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late 1950s (*Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* and *The Ditch*), extreme poverty (*Man with No Name* and *Three Sisters*), and life in a psychiatric hospital (*Til Death Do Us Part*). In April and May 2014, Wang Bing had a major show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, to great public and critical acclaim. The exhibition concept and design,

developed jointly by the artist and the Pompidou's curators, was the first to fully reflect the multifaceted nature of his work. It included a complete retrospective of his films, new material premiered as installations, and for the first time, an exhibition of his still photography. In 2017 Wang Bing was awarded the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival for *Mrs. Fang*, and in 2018, *Dead Souls* was selected for the out of competition segment of the Cannes Film Festival. In 2021, Le BAL in Paris mounted an exhibition entitled *The Walking Eye*, and the French Cinematheque presented a retrospective of his films. The 2023 Cannes Film Festival will present two new films by Wang Bing: *Youth (Spring)* in the Official Competition, and *Man in Black* as a Special Screening.



© Jean-Pierre Cousin

WANG BING's Filmography

Feature Films

- 2003** *WEST OF THE TRACKS* (TIE XI QU)
Documentary, 554 minutes
. **Lisbon International Documentary Festival, Grand Prize,**
. **FIDMarseille, Grand Prize**
. **Nantes Three Continents Film Festival, Montgolfière d'or**
- 2007** *FENGMING, CHRONIQUE D'UNE FEMME CHINOISE* (HE FENGMING)
Documentary, 184 minutes
. **Cannes Film Festival 2007 Official Selection**
- 2010** *THE DITCH*
Fiction, 113 minutes
. **Venice Film Festival 2010, Official Competition**
- 2012** *THREE SISTERS* (SAN ZIMEI)
Documentary, 153 minutes
. **Venice Film Festival 2013, Orizzonti Competition Best Film Doc**
. **Lisboa, Best Film**
. **Nantes Three Continents Film Festival, Montgolfière d'or Audience Award**
. **Dubai IFF, Best Director Prize**
- 2013** *'TIL MADNESS DO US PART*
Documentary, 227 minutes
. **Venice Film Festival 2013, Out of Competition**
. **Nantes Three Continents Film Festival Montgolfière d'argent**
- 2016** *TA'ANG, UN PEUPLE EN EXIL ENTRE CHINE ET BIRMANIE*
. **Berlinale 2016, Forum**
- 2016** *BITTER MONEY* (KU QIÁN)
Documentary, 156 minutes
. **Venice Film Festival 2016, Orizzonti Competition Best Screenplay Prize**
- 2016** *MRS. FANG* (FĀNG XIÙYĪNG)
Documentary, 86 minutes
. **Locarno Film Festival International Competition 2017 Golden Leopard**
- 2018** *DEAD SOULS* (SI LÍNGHÚN)
Documentary, 495 minutes
. **Cannes Film Festival 2018 Official Selection Out of Competition**
- 2023** *YOUTH (SPRING)* (QING CHUN (CHUN))
Documentary, 215 minutes
. **Cannes Film Festival 2023 Official Selection Competition**

Installations and Video Art Works

2008 *CRUDE OIL* (YUAN YOU)

Installation, 14 hours

. Rotterdam Film Festival 2008, Special Mention Award

COLLECTION OF REINA SOFIA MUSEUM, MADRID

2009 *MAN WITH NO NAME* (WUMINGZHE)

Video Art, 97 minutes

REPRESENTED BY GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL

**COLLECTIONS OF CENTRE POMPIDOU (PARIS) AND M+ MUSEUM
HONG KONG**

2014 *FATHER AND SONS* (FU YU ZI)

Video Art, 87 minutes

**. Lisbon International Documentary Festival, Best Film
(Grand Prize)**

2014 *TRACES* (YI ZHI)

Video Art, shot in 35mm, 29 minutes

COLLECTION OF M+ MUSEUM HONG KONG

2017 *15 HOURS* (SHIWU XIAOSHI)

Installation, 15 hours 50 minutes

**COLLECTION OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
OF ATHENS COLLECTION OF CNAP, FRANCE**

2018 *BEAUTY LIVES IN FREEDOM*

(MEI ZAI ZIYOU - GAO ERTAI)

Video Art, 265 minutes

COLLECTION OF REINA SOFIA MUSEUM, MADRID

2023 *MAN IN BLACK* (HEI YI REN)

Video Art, 60 minutes

**. Cannes Film Festival 2023 Official Selection, Special
Screening**

REPRESENTED BY GOODMAN GALLERY

Crew

Director	WANG BING
Image	MAEDA YOSHITAKA, SHAN XIAOHUI, SONG YANG, LIU XIANHUI, DING BIHAN, WANG BING
Editing	DOMINIQUE AUVRAY, XU BINGYUAN, LIYO GONG
Sound	RANKO PAUKOVIC
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