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Venezia 67 – Competition

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OFFICIAL SELECTION 2010

夹边沟

THE DITCH

A film by WANG BING





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WIL PRODUCTIONS
LES FILMS DE L'ÉTRANGER
and **ENTRE CHIEN ET LOUP**

PRESENT

夹边沟

THE DITCH

A film by WANG BING

2010 · HONG KONG · FRANCE · BELGIUM · RUNNING TIME 1H49 MIN · 35 MM · 1.85 · DOLBY SRD · COLOUR

PLEASE NOTE: Photos and press kit can be downloaded from www.wildbunch.biz

SYNOPSIS

At the end of the 1950s, the Chinese government condemned many thousands of citizens - considered 'right wing dissidents' due their past activities, criticisms of the Communist Party or simply their backgrounds and families - to forced labour camps.

Deported for reeducation to the Jiabiangou Camp in Western China, in the heart of the Gobi Desert, thousands of miles from their families and loved ones, some 3,000 poor or middle-class 'intellectuals' from Gansu Province were forced to submit to conditions of absolute destitution. As a result of backbreaking physical labour, an unrelentingly extreme climate and terrible food shortages, many perished nightly in the ditches where they slept.

THE DITCH recounts their fate - an unflinching account of the very extremes of the human condition.

Director's statement

In 1957 the Chinese government launched a nationwide 'Anti-Rightist' movement, labelling perhaps a million or more of its citizens as 'rightists', until they were finally rehabilitated between 1978 to 1981.

Between 2005 and 2007 I interviewed many of the survivors of Jiabiangou Camp [some of them, several times] and learned from them about the realities of their time there. Their stories and Yang Xianhui's novel "Goodbye, Jiabiangou", formed the basis for the screenplay of the film. Production constraints eventually made it necessary to focus only on the last three months of life at the camp's Mingshui annex, high on the Gobi plateau.

In making *THE DITCH* I explored the possibilities of using a documentary style to develop a realistic [film] idiom, adding the heightened dramatization of a feature, while also drawing on classical Chinese drama for the characters' traditional expression of tragedy and suffering. The first half of the film shows these men submissively waiting for death in the arid, trackless Gobi desert. In the second half, the arrival of a woman disturbs them in their silent wait. Her presence brings a new element into the film: the impact of intense ideological pressure on the spirit of ordinary Chinese people in history. Some of the men refuse to submit and choose escape, but in a way that brings them closer to death. In this history, realistically speaking, submission and endurance are the only coin that Chinese people have had to exchange for a small measure of peace to live their lives.

Director's biography

Born in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China, in 1967, Wang Bing studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art (1992) and cinematography at Beijing Film Academy (1995). He began his independent filmmaking career in 1999.

Director's filmography

2008 COAL MONEY (TONG DAO)

Documentary, 52 minutes.

International competition, Cinema Du Reel, Paris, France, 2009.

2008 CRUDE OIL (YUAN YOU)

Documentary film installation, 14 hours.

Supported by Hubert Bals Fund Rotterdam.

Premiered at Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2008.

Hong Kong Film Festival, 2008.

2007 FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR

(HE FENGMING)

Documentary, 184 minutes.

Cannes Film Festival, 2007 - Official Selection.

Toronto International Film Festival, 2007.

Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2008.

2007 BRUTALITY FACTORY

(BAOLI GONGCHANG)

Short in the anthology STATE OF THE WORLD.

Cannes Film Festival, 2007 - Directors' Fortnight.

1999 - 2003 WEST OF THE TRACKS (TIE XI QU)

Documentary in three parts, 554 minutes.

Part 1: RUST (244 minutes)

Part 2: REMNANTS (178 minutes)

Part 3: RAILS (132 minutes)

Lisbon International Documentary Festival, 2002

(Grand Prize)

Marseille Festival of Documentary Film, 2003

(Grand Prize)

Three Continents Nantes Film Festival, 2003

(Golden Balloon, documentary section)

Yamagata International Documentary Festival, 2003

(Robert and Frances Flaherty Prize)

Interview with WANG BING

Can you briefly give us the film's historical background?

In 1957, following the so-called 'Hundred Flowers Campaign', the Chinese Communist Party launched in reaction a campaign of 'Anti-Rightist' repression against more than a million citizens as a result of their backgrounds or criticism of the Party. Between 1957 and 1958, three thousand 'right wing deviants' (or 'Rightists') from Gansu Province were sentenced to forced labour in Jiabiangou Reeducation Camp, at the edge of the Gobi Desert in North-West China. By 1960, all of China was suffering a drought. From October that year, the 1,500 survivors of Jiabiangou Camp were rounded up at Mingshui in a new camp annexe, at Gaotai. Exhaustion, lack of food and climatic conditions were such that a massacre was inevitable. Barely 500 survived.

To evoke the destiny of these 'Rightists' I limited myself to depicting the last three months of life at the Mingshui camp. I did not want to be either exhaustive, nor didactic. The choice gave me a unity of both time and place.

Should we view *THE DITCH* as a political film?

Above all for me it's a film about our collective memory, our History. For 10, maybe 20 years, independent Chinese cinema has focussed above all else on the social problems of the poorest working-classes of contemporary China. *THE DITCH* is perhaps the first film to deal directly with contemporary China's political past, talking as it does about the 'Rightists' and what they endured in the reeducation camps. It's still a taboo subject.

How did you go about writing the screenplay?

I went to Paris in 2004 as a participant in the Cannes Cinéfondation Résidence. That's where the project began. During my stay, I wrote a first draft, drawing on a book by Yang Xianhui, to which we had bought the rights. The book gathers together 19 reports under the title "Goodbye, Jiabianjou". I ended up using three: "The Woman from Shanghai", "The Escape" and "Sick

Bay No. 1". But that wasn't enough from which to build the film. I returned to China and began to research the survivors of the Jiabiangou and Mingshui camps, to collect their stories. It was very difficult and it was exhausting. I often found myself confronted by people who didn't say much, or didn't want to tell everything. I found two or three, then didn't know whether I'd see the others. All that took a lot of time: three years, from 2005 to 2007, and the detective work wasn't so easy. Sometimes an address was out of date, or I'd have the street name but not the number of the building. On one occasion I did one interview, slept in my car, then drove a thousand miles to another interview the next day, without knowing whether the person would agree to talk to me or not. In total, throughout China, I found over a hundred survivors. Perhaps fifteen refused to talk to me. Sometimes it was depressing. At the same time, these encounters could be overwhelming. On one occasion, I travelled from Lanzhou to Shaanxi and when I arrived the man was confused, he was dying. He died a fortnight after my visit. I went back for his funeral and met his brother. Two brothers in the same camp, both survivors, that was very unusual.

Did you film them?

Several times. And we guard those testimonies carefully. Everything in the film really happened at the camp. Nothing has been made up or added. I insisted on that absolutely. In 2007, during my research, I tracked down one of the camp wardens. He had kept two photographs. I also located the son of a 'Rightist', whose father had died in the camp but who had kept all the letters the father had written him. He showed me the last one, written just before his death. And it was while reading it that I understood how I should make the film. What was incredible about the letter, written fifty years previously, was that it could have been written today... it addressed up to date, everyday matters. And that's also why I insisted that it should be in the film. I also located the widow of one of the camp wardens. She had been to the camp and told me at length of what went on day-to-day, of the mood of despair. She explained how the graves were positioned. I relied on her indications, which have subsequently been borne out by other testimonies. For me, what was important was to crosscheck information to ensure we stuck to the truth of situations and events.

Where did you shoot, and for how long?

We shot from October 2008 to the beginning of January 2009, 75 days in total, on HDV, between Gansu and Mongolia, in the Gobi Desert. In a no man's land, beyond all control, in the middle of nowhere. The film, a Hong Kong-French-Belgian co-production, was shot without authorization. So it was hard negotiating with local authorities. Above all we had to take the maximum precautions. For example we built our sets a year ahead of time, not knowing whether we would be visited in the meantime. The place was so deserted that no one was interested. But there was always a risk. The whole film was shot in secret, in a state of great tension and fear that we would be stopped... There were at least 60 of us on set, sometimes more. Every day some people were told one thing, others something else. No one ever had full knowledge of the project. But on the last day we knew that tomorrow that would be it. It was 4 o'clock in the morning and we left immediately, by car. Straight to Beijing. We fled! We left 5 people on set, that's all. I have to say that we were worried: how to make sure that everyone got out in complete safety.

How were things organized on the shoot?

Set management wasn't an easy task. For example, it was hard finding extras in the region, given that working conditions were very tough, and the desolation approached that which you see in the film itself. Winter begins at the start of November - with temperatures of between -15° and -20°C... The heads of department came mainly from Beijing; they agreed because they knew and trusted me. The rest of the crew was recruited locally, in order to go as much as possible unnoticed. For the cast it was pretty much the same thing. Li Xiangnian, the old man who patiently collects seeds, is credited as 'special guest appearance', not because he's a Chinese cinema superstar, not at all, but because he is a survivor of Jiabangou Camp. He succeeded in escaping on three occasions. For me it was important to have with us people who had lived this story.

As for the producers, the only possibility was to work at a distance. We were in touch by phone. It would have been dangerous for everyone had my French and Belgian producers visited the set. My Hong Kong producer stayed for barely half a day, just long enough

to collect the rushes tapes and take them back to Beijing for safekeeping. In fact, I was storing them 250 kilometers away from the location. Only she and I knew where. I did the couriering myself. Why 250 kilometers away? Because that was the nearest place! They were with someone I trusted completely, a survivor of another camp.

Once the shoot was finished, was the hardest part over?

The material we accumulated during the shoot was considerable: 161 tapes, more than 130 hours of rushes, which we had duplicated and sent to France. One step, hard and formidable for sure, had been crossed, but you never know till the end what's going to be hardest... From February to August 2009 I underwent a slow process of decanting, in a suburb of Paris, a long way from China. Watching and re-watching the entirety of the material, confronting images and sounds but also taking a distance from them; questioning myself about their 'rightness', their relevance, their power; asking myself how the Real exists within them. This film represents so much for me that I needed time to reflect alone. My notion was to introduce a documentary style within a realist fiction, but the approaches for a documentary and a work of fiction are not the same. Fiction devises a dramaturgy of the Real, and tangles with the codes of classical Chinese drama, to express suffering and tragedy.

For me this stage did not consist only in leading up to a rough-cut of some four hours, but in seeing clearly what was essential and what was not, before even organizing the sequences. It allowed me to know what cinematographic game I was playing, or wanted to play. I did not embark on a traditional way of working, involving the immediate engagement of an editor. I wanted in some way to digest my material, to immerse myself in it, to test it, to lose myself within it the better to find my way, and perhaps to prepare myself best for a phase of editing that signified, for me, sharing the film with someone else... in a sense, giving them the keys. In China, the editor is most often there to execute the director's orders. I knew that in France, in Europe, things are different: the editor is a true collaborator in the creative process. I dreaded it somewhat, but at the same time I desired it. But I had to be ready to work

with Marie-Hélène Dozo.

And when did that happen?

Last autumn, in Brussels. A few very intense weeks. Marie-Helene's suggestions opened up numerous horizons. Little by little the film I had been dreaming of began to appear. By stages, we reached an edit of two hours and ten minutes. I had the feeling that that it wasn't possible to go further, except by sending the film in a direction I did not want. At the beginning of January, Marie-Hélène moved on to work on Mahamat Saleh Haroun's *A SCREAMING MAN*. We had to stop there. And that version was for a long time considered the final version. Sound editing, sound effects, digital special effects, all this had been begun on that understanding. But I still had doubts. Had certain sequences been cut too short? And others, did they truly justify their inclusion? In April I decided to ask the opinion of close friends who know my work, and their responses convinced me to return to the edit with Marie-Hélène for a very short time during May. Certainly it was worrying for everyone, but we all agreed, my producers and I, that the film would benefit from it, even if it caused numerous technical complications and incurred additional costs. We were proved right - it was necessary. I felt at last that I had truly completed my job. All that time was necessary for memory to do its work...

THE DITCH

Historical Background

On February 27, 1957, Mao Zedong makes his famous speech "On the Correct Handling of the Contradictions Among the People". To re-establish his authority over the Communist Party and to improve relations between the Party and the population, he calls for a 'campaign of rectification' that will serve to return a certain freedom of expression to the Chinese. The stated aim is to encourage the population, intellectuals in particular, to criticize the Party in order that it might correct its shortcomings. This is the 'Hundred Flowers Campaign' ("May a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend!")

The movement begins tentatively: many intellectuals are wary, having suffered repression in the past. But from mid-May 1957, dissent explodes. Almost immediately, the very nature of the Party itself and its role at the heart of Chinese society is taken to task. Its monolithic structure is denounced, as are its bureaucracy, authoritarianism and incompetence, the exorbitant privileges enjoyed by Party members, and the monopoly of information they possess. Anti-establishment protesters demand institutional reform. The student movement takes shape at the prestigious Peking University: protest posters (*dazibaos*) are stuck up in dormitories, refectories and classrooms. Students reclaim the freedom of the press: they denounce Party intolerance of professors who are not Party members, the adoption of Soviet-style educational model and the attitude of the regime towards writers. Very quickly, the State system itself and the rule of the Party are reassessed.

When the movement spreads into the provinces, the Communist leaders fear that unrest will take hold of the factories. The relaxation of restraints has already led to petitions, demonstrations, even strikes. The 'Hundred Flowers' generate a class-based unionist movement. Its very existence threatened by a movement which risks escaping all control, the Party reacts drastically with an about-face. In its editorial of June 8th, 1957, the 'People's Daily' denounces "those who wish to use the rectification campaign in order to wage class struggle". The only legitimate criticisms to be

authorized will be "positive", those which allow the Party to progress. The article marks the beginning of a campaign of violent repression that will mark every sector of Chinese society.

Dissent is crushed, and 'deviationism' brutally dealt with: humiliating self-criticism sessions, dismissals, arbitrary postings, imprisonments, deportations, executions... More than 400,000 'Rightists' are sent to work and reeducation camps (*laogai*).

From August-September 1957, it is no longer simply a matter of pursuing 'Rightists'. The 'purge' spares no one, from 'old communists' to those in more overt opposition, or those whose 'class origins' are classed as 'suspicious', in a terrible spiral where violence competes with absurdity. The total number of victims of the 'Anti-Rightist' campaign is currently estimated at around one million people.

Shortly after, Mao launches the 'Great Leap Forward', which lasts between 1958 and 1960. Deploying propaganda and coercion, his aim is to stimulate production by means of collectivised agriculture, the expansion of industrial infrastructure and the realization of substantial public works, all in record time. Entirely unrealistic, the project is a disaster. China barely escapes complete economic collapse. Nonetheless, to this day, the expression 'Great Leap Forward' is often wrongly used by Western journalists to describe China's dazzling economic upswing.

It had been thought that Mao Zedong's regime knew how to find the means to feed China's vast populace and to put an end to the chronic food shortages that had scarred the country's history. The 'Great Famine' that raged between 1958 and 1962 - a direct consequence of the 'Great Leap Forward' - provided a powerful rebuttal. It has to date not been the subject of an official report. Figures given by various external studies estimate the number of deaths at anywhere between 15 and 30 million.

When the Cultural Revolution occurs in 1968, large numbers of 'Rightists' will be re-arrested: the defamatory label will not be 'revised' till 1978.

THE DITCH depicts the everyday life of the 'Rightists',

victims of the repressive 'Hundred Flowers Campaign' who, in the reeducation camps in which they found themselves, forced to endure the famine that arose from the 'Great Leap Forward'.

CAST

LU YE
LIAN RENJUN
XU CENZI
YANG HAoyu
CHENG ZHENGWU
JING NIANSONG

Special guest appearance:
LI XIANGNIAN

WANG JIELU
LI DEGUANG
WANG DAYUAN
LEI LIMING
LI JUNQI
FENG ZI
YUAN GUANGCHENG
TIAN XIAOYU
QI GAOLI
ZHAO XINGFA
CHEN WENYI
JIAO GUOFENG
ZHANG GUANGCHENG
HE LEI
HE XIANGDONG
WANG WEI
HUO JUNPENG

CREW

Screenplay by

WANG BING

based on "Goodbye, Jiabiangou", a novel by YANG XIANHUI, and on testimony by TI ZHONGZHENG and the other survivors.

Artistic Directors

BAO LIGE, XIANG HONGHUI

Cameraman

LU SHENG

Sound Engineer

REN LIANG

Costume Designer

WANG FUZHENG

Props

FENG XUECHENG

Set Designer

ZHANG FULI

Production Managers

WANG YANG, ZHANG WANXIONG

Editor

MARIE-HÉLÈNE DOZO

Sound Editors

GILLES LAURENT, VALÉRIE LEDOCTE
(Belgium), **FU KANG** (China)

Sound Mixer

MICHEL SCHILLINGS

Postproduction Manager

MICHI NORO

Associate Producer (development)

FRANCESCA FEDER (Aeternam Films)

Commissioning Editors

PIERRE MERLE,
FRANÇOIS SAUVAGNARGUES (ARTE France)

Co-producers

SÉBASTIEN DELLOYE, DIANA ELBAUM

Executive Producers

K. LIHONG, MAO HUI, WANG BING
PHILIPPE AVRIL, FRANCISCO VILLA-LOBOS

Production Companies

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LES FILMS DE L'ÉTRANGER

Co-production Company

ENTRE CHIEN ET LOUP

Broadcaster

ARTE

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Résidence, Atelier

CINEMART / ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA AWARD
International Film Festival Rotterdam

HUBERT BALS FUND

International Film Festival Rotterdam

PPP (PUSAN PROMOTION PLAN)

Pusan International Film Festival

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