



THREE SISTERS

An Icarus Films Release
A film by Wang Bing

Best Film Orizzonti Award, Venice Film Festival
Best Film, Doc Lisboa Film Festival
Best Documentary, Dubai Film Festival
Official Selection, Toronto International Film Festival

"Unquestionably eye-opening, deeply human."
—Variety

"Critic's Pick! Documents extreme poverty in rural China with the compassionate eye and inexhaustible patience of a director whose curiosity about his country's unfortunates never seems to wane."
—The New York Times

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LOGLINE

Three little sisters live alone in a small village in the high mountains of China's Yunnan region. Master documentarian Wang Bing beautifully captures the working lives of three young sisters in a poor village in the high mountains of China's Yunnan region.

SYNOPSIS

One of his generation's most important documentary filmmakers, director Wang Bing is at the height of his powers in THREE SISTERS. The film introduces viewers to 10-year-old YingYing, 6-year-old Zhenzhen and 4-year-old Fenfen, who live alone in Xiyangtang, a tiny rural village in the high mountains of China's Yunnan province. Their father is away working in the city; their mother left the family long ago.

The girls help their grandfather or aunt in exchange for meals. They spend their days at grueling tasks: herding sheep, goats and pigs, searching for firewood, collecting dung. Games are few and far between. The eldest, Yingying, is her sisters' primary caretaker, shouldering responsibilities far beyond her years.

Wang's hand-held footage beautifully captures the region's dramatic landscapes and plunging, mountainous scenery in THREE SISTERS, an essential part of the international film canon.

SELECTED FESTIVALS

Best Film Orizzonti Award, Venice Film Festival
Best Film Award, Doc Lisboa
Audience Award and Best Film Award, Festival des 3 Continents
Best Documentary Award, Dubai Film Festival
Grand prix Award, Ecumenical jury Award, E-changer Award, Don Quijote Award,
Fribourg Film Festival
Hong Kong Film Festival
Edinburgh Film Festival
New Zealand Film Festival
Taipei Film Festival
Toronto International Film Festival

Press Room
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ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

The film has been shot in a small Chinese village in the East Mountains of the Yunnan province, at 3,000 meters high. The village is called XI YANG TANG (the pond to wash the sheep) where around 30 families reside there.

Because of the altitude, no grains grow there. Potatoes become the only food possible for men and animals. In the middle of the village flows a small river, the only drinkable water of the neighborhood. Down in the valley, a school is organized for the village kids to attend where three teachers have been sent by the central government. The houses of the village are constructed with cob walls and straw roofs. Each family owns only a few worn wood furniture and some rare field tools. The houses are dark and humid.

Like many other places in China, young adults have left for the cities looking for a better life, leaving the kids in the village, along with the elderly and few adults who couldn't leave. Dressed in shredded clothes, the villagers work daily in the fields while the kids and elderly take care of the animals. Living alone with the elderly, the kids are left unattended and with little to no education. Most of them stop school when they start grade 6, as college is too expensive for the families. Some of them can't even go to school since they have to work in the fields.

Every family has 3 to 4 children. Generally, the families neglect the girls. Before their 14th birthday, the parents choose for them a husband whom they will marry a few years later. Since life in the village is quite tough, the girls try to find a husband from a more prosperous area in order for their family to receive more gifts from his parents. The boys of the village have difficulties finding wives, the only way would be for their parents to propose an early match when the two are still children. They will then have to offer gifts to the girl's family early on as well as offer help if her family has any problems (financial or other).

It's in that village that we will discover the daily life of a family of 3 daughters. The father, 37 years old, has a very violent nature. A few years ago, his wife left the village, abandoned her 3 children and has never heard from her since then. With his piece of land and his two pigs, the father tries to feed his small family. Due to the tough weather in this high mountain area, potato harvest varies every year. He could never be certain if he would have enough for the year. Thus he has decided to try his luck near the cities of the valley, leaving the girls alone in the house.

The three girls, underfed, look much younger than they actually are. YING, who is 10 but looks more like 8, went to school for two years before dropping out to take care of her two sisters when her mother left the family. Every morning she helps them get up, cooks some potatoes and feeds the pigs. She is in charge of the house. Her daily schedule is simple but quite loaded. She has replaced the mother. She has become the one who carries the moral burden of this poor family in despair. Smart and mischievous, the second daughter is always on the move trying to escape the control of her elder sister. 6 years old, but looks like 4, ZHEN doesn't seem to believe in the authority of YING. She is always looking for an occasion to play and have fun.

FEN, the youngest, is 4 years old and always covered with mud. Quiet and lonely, she follows her sisters while being in her own world.

The film follows these main characters during 6 months, the simple reality of the life of these girls and shows how humanity survives in the middle of a very hostile environment.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This film introduces an ordinary poor peasant's family and their daily lives. We follow the relation between the family members, how in such misery men are capable of adapting themselves in order to survive, how even in the middle of nothing children manage to grow up, how the daily minute things are mountains for those three girls.

When I first met the family about 2 years ago, I was touched by the incredibly difficult situation in which those kids were growing up. It reminded me of my childhood, and the poverty I had to face and adapt to. It's an inhuman world where these young human beings live like animals, yet at the same time so human as the bond exists between them helps them cope with life. This is why I want to testify about the reality of these poor peasants' children's life in contemporary China. The image of modernity, of economic development, and of an almost occidental world that China is presenting nowadays has slowly made the other side – the human side – disappear from our sight. What about the humanity in all of that? Those who can't go to school because of the lack of money? And those who survive without much hope to benefit from economic growth?

I didn't want to make an ethnographical study of the family. I wanted to leave the experience of this life directly to the audience, with the idea of a direct comprehension of the universality of those children's lives, a more objective and direct image of their reality, in order to feel and understand in their inner self the intimate feelings of this family.

That's why I filmed with steady shoots and cameras to amplify all the details of their existence and of the duration and time of their daily schedule. We are the witnesses of their primitive life. The story of this film is the pure and simple one of human beings.

—Wang Bing

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

"In chronicling individual, present-day lives, Wang gives a sense of his country's recent history. The films rarely delve directly into discussions of government policies, with works such as 2007's *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* and 2010's *The Ditch* (which recall the fates of victims of the Cultural Revolution through documentary interviewing and fictionalized re-enactments, respectively) proving more exceptions than rules in this regard.

"Political critiques are instead largely left implicit, and made through Wang's act of allying himself with people that have been pushed onto his culture's fringes. The films suggest that China's transition from Maoism to an assimilation of capitalism has not only failed to improve, but actually worsened the lives of many of its citizens, who survive in spite of it. The people that Wang records are ones who move him, as evidenced by his willingness to let them guide the films."

—Aaron Cutler, *Cineaste*



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

Born in 1967 in China's central Shaanxi province, Wang studied first photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art, and then cinematography at the Beijing Film Academy. He began his career as an independent filmmaker in 1999. Released in 2003, his feature directorial debut *West of the Tracks* is a monumental documentary work, exceeding 9 hours in length, that was a great success internationally. Filmed in the northern Chinese district of Tiexi, *West of*

the Tracks is a strikingly profound contemplation on the lives of workers in the decaying industrial district. Since 2003, Wang has made 10 documentaries, many of which have been released theatrically to wide acclaim. A retrospective of his entire oeuvre was presented in Centre Pompidou in Paris.

In addition to documentaries, Wang also produced two acclaimed fiction films *Brutality Factory* and *The Ditch*, as well as *Crude Oil*, 14-hour long documentary video installation and photographic series.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2016	TA'ANG	Documentary, 148 minutes
2014	FATHER AND SONS (FU YU ZI)	Documentary, 97 minutes
2014	TRACES (YIZHI)	Gallery Installation, 25 minutes
2013	'TIL MADNESS DO US PART (FENG AI)	Documentary, 227 minutes
2012	THREE SISTERS (SAN ZIMEI) Best Film, Venice Film Festival Best Film, Doc Lisboa Best Film, Audience Award in Festival des 3 Continents Best Documentary, Asia Africa Award at the Dubai International Film Festival Grand Prize, E-changer Award, Don Quijote Award at Fribourg Film Festival	Documentary, 153 minutes
2010	THE DITCH (JIA BIAN GOU) Venice Film Festival	Narrative Feature, 113 minutes
2009	MAN WITH NO NAME (WUMINGZHE)	Gallery Installation, 97 minutes
2008	COAL MONEY (TONG DAO)	Gallery Installation, 52 minutes

- 2008 CRUDE OIL (YUAN YOU) Documentary film installation, 14 hours
Rotterdam International Film Festival
Hong Kong International Film Festival
- 2007 FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR (HE FENGMING) Documentary, 184 minutes
Cannes Film Festival
Toronto International Film Festival
Rotterdam International Film Festival
- 2007 BRUTALITY FACTORY (BAOLI GONGCHANG) Short film
Director's Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival
- 1999- 03 WEST OF THE TRACKS (TIE XI QU) Documentary in three parts, 554 minutes
Part 1: RUST (244 mins); Part 2: REMNANTS (178 mins); Part 3: RAILS (132 mins)
Grand Prize, Lisbon International Documentary Festival
Grand Prize, Marseille Festival of Documentary Film Festival
Best Documentary, Three Continents Nantes Film Festival
Flaherty Prize, Yamagata Documentary Film Festival

More Information:

<http://icarusfilms.com/filmmakers/wangbing.html>

<http://www.icarusfilms.com/dgenerate/tilm.html>

IN THE PRESS

"*Three Sisters* is about three young girls, living high in the mountains of Yunnan. They have been abandoned by their mother and virtually left to their own devices by their father, who is forced to earn a living away from home. These sisters have no place of "refuge" other than home, but home in this case is a desperately poor, bleakly unnurturing place, where the girls are left largely to their own devices. Though a neighboring aunt feeds them, they essentially take care of each other. They live, play, and sleep in dirt. Their home is a cavelike dwelling—dark, dirty, and littered with root vegetables, shared with their few scrawny domestic animals. Under Wang's compassionate gaze, though, this is no study in cinematic miserablism: the girls (ten-year-old Yingying, six-year-old Zhenzhen, and little four-year-old Fenfen) have fully realized personalities and emotional lives. They play and work at the household tasks necessary for survival.

"The most basic refuge, the family, is here broken, incomplete, barely sustaining. Yingying is mother, father, and sister to her two younger siblings. She carries this burden with efficiency and a kind of stoic determination and strength that the situation forces upon her, and that her indomitable character sustains. Their father does return from time to time, to bring some clothes and share a meal before he goes off to work again. Towards the end of the film, his new girlfriend and her child come to join the three sisters. Though an ad hoc newly constituted family group forms, Zhenzhen articulates for us its continuing inadequacy. With sustained observation and exquisite empathy, Wang locates something that is without shape or form, but that is even more real than the mere hardscrabble details of a wearing struggle for existence: he makes visible a kind of invincible energy, a life force that pushes our three heroines to survive."

—Shelly Kracier, *Cinema Scope*

FILM CREDITS

English Title: *THREE SISTERS*
Chinese Title: *SAN ZIMEI*

Director: WANG BING

Camera: HUANG WENHAI, LI PEIFENG, WANG BING

Editing: ADAM KERBY, LOUISE PRINCE

Sound: FU KANG, ANTOINE FOURNIER

Producers: SYLVIE FAGUER, MAO HUI

Production: ALBUM PRODUCTIONS
CHINESE SHADOWS

In association with ARTE France – LA LUCARNE
FUORI ORARIO – RAI CINEMA

Running time: 153 minutes
Image: Color
Country: Hong Kong / France
Production year: 2012
Release: 2016
Sound: Stereo

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