

# The New York Times

## Far From China's Bustling Cities, the Grind of Poverty

'Three Sisters,' a Documentary by Wang Bing

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS      MAY 9, 2013



Not for the faint of heart or weak of bladder, Wang Bing's two-and-a-half-hour "Three Sisters" 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.

Filming for six months in a remote hillside village in 2010, Mr. Wang follows the spirit-crushing lives of a short-tempered peasant and his three little daughters. Their mother ran off long ago, and now Yingying, 10; 6-year-old Zhenzhen; and Fenfen, 4 — all so malnourished that they look years younger — spend their days doing chores and herding sheep. But when their father leaves for a job in the city, taking the two youngest girls with him, Yingying is left alone. A grandfather and an aunt live close by, but the girl's isolation and sadness suggest a poignant hopelessness, as though she has reached the age at which she has begun to notice a future. And it's not pretty.

Though less overtly political than Mr. Wang's nine-hour masterpiece from 2003, "Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks" (which chronicled China's painful transition from a state-run economy to a free market), "Three Sisters" makes its point in lice-infested hovels and with the bleeding feet of endlessly coughing children. A communal meal at a great-uncle's house reveals village

elders sniffing at the government's proposed "rural revival," knowing that it really means extra land fees for already strapped peasants. Clearly, the country's economic boom is not trickling down, leaving them frozen in a way of life as ancient as the ground beneath their feet.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/10/movies/three-sisters-a-documentary-by-wang-bing.html>

# VARIETY

## Review: 'Three Sisters'

Jay Weissberg

SEPTEMBER 7, 2012 | 11:02AM PT

*An unquestionably eye-opening, deeply human, strikingly lensed look at an impoverished family whose rudimentary living conditions are a sharp riposte to the illusion of China's economic boom.*

Returning to his docu roots following "[The Ditch](#)," maverick helmer Wang [Bing](#) offers a relatively modest running time of two-and-a-half hours devoted to lice-infested, dung-collecting kids in a remote Yunnan village. "[Three Sisters](#)" is an unquestionably eye-opening, deeply human, strikingly lensed look at an impoverished family whose rudimentary living conditions are a sharp riposte to [the illusion](#) of China's economic boom. More accessible than Wang's previous docus, it's still too long to attract all but confirmed devotees — a pity, since trimming would sharpen impact and increase exposure beyond Sinophile film nerds and scattered human-rights fests.

Wang shot for six months in the village of Xi Yang Tang, a muddy collection of cob-walled dwellings housing about 80 families along with free roaming farm animals. Electricity generally consists of a solitary bulb that barely illuminates the dirt floors; water comes from a trickling faucet outside, and potatoes are the chief staple for humans and animals alike. Cell phones have barely made an incursion, while wind whips the stepped hills with a chilling consistency.

The [three sisters](#) of the title are Yingying (10), Zhenzhen (6) and Fenfen (4), daughters of Sun Shunbao, a peasant abandoned by his wife. Sun scrapes for work in the nearest town of Tonghai, leaving his young daughters alone for weeks or months at a time. Their grandfather Sun Xianliang and aunt Zhu Fulian live just across the dirt path, but interaction is minimal and hardly warm; Yingying keeps herself and her sisters going via back-breaking chores involving animal herding, dung collecting and potato gathering.

The sisters have distinct personalities, with Zhenzhen the mischievous giggler and Fenfen the slightly forlorn follower. Yingying is the sad one, the burden of responsibility lying heavily on her tiny shoulders. Isolated, stern-faced and

unbearably lonely, she's rarely able to go to school, and interactions with cousins and other village peers have a heartrending imperviousness to play or other social exchanges. When her father decides to take the two youngest tots to live with him in town, Yingying remains behind, a pathetic figure seen in a restricted pool of indoor light, surrounded by shadowy darkness.

During a rare visit to the girls' great-uncle in a neighboring village, local elders discuss the emptiness of official talk promising "rural revival." It's the one moment where Wang concretizes the kinds of critique made more explicit in "Fengming: A Chinese Memoir" (intimate at three hours) and "West of the Tracks" (epic at nine hours). This explicit denunciation, though obviously unscripted, is all but unnecessary given scenes of living conditions that Westerners could only call medieval. From Zhenzhen's bleeding feet in disintegrating galoshes to the girls' damp bedding and Yingying's slight body wrapped in an increasingly filthy hoodie branded "Lovely Diary" on the back, "Three Sisters" presents a vision of unmitigated squalor that's unlikely to change anytime soon.

Wang doesn't conceal occasional acknowledgments of the camera, though there's no direct interaction as in "Fengming," and the lensing gets shaky when climbing uphill with Yingying (the cameraman's panting can be heard). The village's surrounding harsh terrain, gusty and spotted with patches of snow, has a certain majesty far removed from the squalid dell in which the village sits, traversed by proprietary pigs and glum little girls.

<http://variety.com/2012/film/reviews/three-sisters-3-1117948239/>

## Three Sisters (San zi mei): Venice Review

9:14 AM PDT 9/15/2012 by Neil Young



Chinese maestro Wang Bing return to documentary-making chronicles rural poverty and took top prize in Venice's Orizzonti sidebar.

China's most acclaimed documentary-maker consolidates his lofty reputation with *Three Sisters* (*San zi mei*), which sees **Wang Bing** return to non-fiction two years after his debut feature *The Ditch* competed for Venice's Golden Lion. Likewise premiering on the Lido before a North American bow in Toronto, this challenging two-and-a-half-hour chronicle of rural poverty in a remote mountain community beat some strong contenders to take the Orizzonti sidebar's top honors and is guaranteed plentiful exposure at serious-minded festivals.

While little more than a vignette in comparison with Wang's nine-hour international breakthrough *Tie Xi Qu - West of the Tracks* (2003), *Three Sisters'* daunting length and tough subject-matter will unfortunately restrict its viewership to adventurous cinephiles and those particularly interested in the topical issues raised. Small-screen prospects are similarly limited, but this Chinese/French co-production appeals as a long-term high-end DVD prospect, especially if packaged along with Wang's previous marathon enterprises.

Having interviewed elderly labor-camp survivor for 2007's unadorned, three-hour *Fengming - A Chinese Memoir* (also known as *Chronicle of a Chinese Woman*), Wang now turns his attention to the opposite end of the age-spectrum. Indeed, this latest project could more accurately have been entitled *Yingying - A Chinese Childhood*, as ten-year-old **Sun Yingying** has much more screen

time than both of her siblings combined.

With their mother having abandoned the family, and their father Shunbao seeking work in a far-off city, the sisters - Yingying, six-year-old Zhenzhen and four-year-old Fenfen - spend the autumn with their grandfather on his tumble-down farm in a hilly corner of Yunnan province, bordering Burma in China's far south. And while there are episodes set in a relatively nearby school, formal education is evidently less of a priority than helping out with the farm's many animals - pigs, sheep, goats, chickens - and its potato crops. This burden falls especially strongly on Yingying, an uncomplaining factotum whose workload would doubtless tire many adults.

Wang observes Yingying and the other children, including various friends and cousins, as they endure often squalid and unhygienic conditions with cheerful resilience, clearly never having known any other way of life. Dispensing with score and voice-over, and with only a small handful of explanatory captions, Wang nevertheless makes eloquent points about how the villagers on view have yielded so few benefits from their country's booming economic success, and about how the children in particular enjoy few of the rights and pleasures their counterparts in other developed nations have long taken for granted. Supervision is rare and opportunities for play fleeting, though occasionally the kids do get to wander the spectacularly windswept terrain around the farm, these misty hillsides a welcome change from the murky darkness of the farm's interiors.

Many documentaries give the viewer a chance to 'visit' places otherwise unfamiliar and practically inaccessible, but *Three Sisters* also offers a kind of time-travel, as little appears to have changed in this area for decades or even centuries. The tumbledown farmstead with its muddy yard and rudimentary stone constructions looks like something out of *Wuthering Heights* - ironic, given that the seminal **Anton Chekhov** play from which Wang cheekily borrows his title was itself part-inspired by the plight of the Brontës in their provincial parsonage.

Originating as an 18-minute 'postcard' film entitled *Xi Yi Tang (Happy Valley)* and made for Barcelona's Center for Contemporary Culture in 2009, *Three Sisters* now sprawls in leisurely and sometimes repetitive fashion across its 150-odd minutes. This unvarnished work's monumental nature will of course be part of its distinction and appeal for many, but one could also argue that a more conventional running-time might focus and thus sharpen the strength of Wang's vision, and make it accessible to wider audiences who may never even ponder the realities of China's forgotten poor.

And while the three credited cinematographers find an unassumingly poetic kind of grandeur in the external scenes, their digital cameras - whose proximity is hardly ever acknowledged by those being filmed - often yield excessively dark images during sequences that take place inside the farm buildings and are thus reliant on the dim available light. What we do see, of course, is often remarkable in its stark, moving simplicity, such as Yingying silently and reflectively munching on yet another potato.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/three-sisters-san-zi-mei-370573>



# Three Sisters

BY [CHRIS CABIN](#)

MAY 9, 2013

The eponymous siblings of *Three Sisters*, Shaanxi-born director Wang Bing's seventh feature, don't lead an enviable life. As their father toils and scrounges in a nearby city, the three girls—Ying, Zhen, and Fen—collect potatoes, haul dung, and tend to various livestock in their small village in China's Yunnan province. Their extended family makes up a notable portion of the village's population as well, but the difference between family and neighbor remains largely indistinguishable in Wang's observational long takes, even as the relations are clearly denoted by titles. The villagers, who sustain a potato plantation and some livestock, share in their collective work's meager rewards, which is often little more than a hot meal and a roof over their heads.

A decade after *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, his towering vision of China in social, economical, and industrial transition, Wang finds the faintest pulse of a genuine socialist economy and community, seemingly light years away from the hyper-modern advancements of the People's Republic that have been documented so invigoratingly by colleague and fellow countryman Jia Zhang-ke. And just as Jia's inimitable, deeply fascinating style, a rousing blend of observational documentary and shrewd narrative inventiveness, mirrors China's complicated state of being, Wang's no-frills style of documentation visually echoes a preadolescent trio's simple yet unforgiving world and its sense of labor as life.

This comes through most clearly in the film's pivotal sequence, in which the sisters' paterfamilias takes six-year-old Zhen and four-year-old Fen away to the city by bus, leaving 10-year-old Ying to tend to their small household under the gaze of her grandfather. As father and daughters make their way up to the bus, Wang's heavy breathing becomes increasingly noticeable as he makes his way up the steep hill to the bus stop. We're consistently aware of his presence, even more so as he serves as his own cinematographer, and the filmmaker spends much of the doc simply following Ying as she goes about her work. The director's brilliant editing gives a steady, inviting pace to Ying's seemingly mundane existence and the banality of her surroundings.

Though this small spot of Yunnan geography seems initially stuck out of time, dubious progress lurks in the mists that often cover the mountainous region. At one point, the village's mayor discusses the inevitability of rising "fees" in the area with his constituents, as nearby areas are being converted and rebuilt in a more modern fashion, even as they live with touch-and-go electricity. It offers a small window of scope, one that's sadly only ruminated on for a few minutes, and suggests that the poverty of the village will only get worse. That Ying's father ultimately returns, unable to make ends meet in the city, underlines the unerring desperation of their station, but also confirms their perseverance and ability to enjoy small things. Their poverty is to blame for Fen's rampant lice infestation and Ying's worrisome cough, to say nothing of the state of their schoolhouse, but the elemental joys become bolder, whether it comes in the form of an apple or a moderate amount of TV time. In essence, *Three Sisters* serves as a measured epilogue to *West of the Tracks*, luxuriating in the tremendous hardships and miniscule triumphs of tradition.

<http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/three-sisters>