

structuring as you started to edit?

In a sense, the structure was dictated by the gradual way we expanded the locations. We started with two workshops, then four, then moved to the workers' living spaces, and then the next logical step was to head out and follow them back home upriver. That dictated the structure of the episodes and the chapters of the whole film. As for the question of selection, usually I rely on my memory. I did my best to be in all locations at the same time [laughs]. During the peak of the shooting, I was running around all day until 11:30 p.m. We had three cameras and I couldn't be everywhere at once, so there were occasions where I was more familiar with what had been shot. For those sections, I didn't bother to look mechanically through everything—I just picked out what I remembered liking best. We thought a lot about the narrative structure. We started editing in 2019, but spent a lot of time moving things around, figuring out a story. Whichever narrative mode you opt for, you're going to have an overabundance of footage. The episodes in this film ended up at about 20 to 25 minutes each, but in the first phase, they were 40 to 45 minutes, which was too long. I just couldn't get my head around it until COVID-19 hit. It was an imposed break, and a useful one. When we got back to it in 2021, it dawned on me that it wasn't a matter of what to put in, but rather what to cut out.

It's striking that the film never narrows its focus to a single figure or group. New characters are constantly being introduced.

The next part won't be so much like that. There will be a few more individuals picked out. But I do like using a loose, decentralized structure. Any film structure has its pros and cons. When you concentrate the action and importance on one character, you feel you're getting a 360-degree view of their life, but it's an illusion; there are all kinds of things you don't see. I use a piecemeal approach because I think that's how things are: dispersed and fragmented. The individual-oriented alternative leads you to bend reality. But I wouldn't say it's a collective picture. I don't subscribe to that concept. Although it's a patchwork structure, I try to maintain the integrity of each person. Whichever part I'm dealing with in the quilt, I want to respect it. It's not total dispersal. When we're focusing on one character or a pair of characters, even from the camera's point of view, we want to show as much as possible that is specific to them. I'm not trying to make a picture of a collective. Otherwise, you would find a flattening of the characters. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

Youth (Spring) is a documentary driven by the thrum of industrial sewing machines — just like the lives of the young garment workers it portrays.

The town of Zhili, about 95 miles from Shanghai, is a center for the children's garment industry. Workers in their teens and early twenties come from surrounding provinces to live in sparse, trash-strewn concrete dorms in the same buildings as the small factories where they spend their days sewing leggings, shorts, fluffy skirts, and jackets with Mickey Mouse hoods.

A remarkably intimate documentary filmed over five years, *Youth (Spring)* takes us into these independent workshops—many on a street named Happiness Road. Relationships form and fall apart. Young women fend off their co-workers' advances. Managers and employees engage in intense negotiations over piece-work rates. Unexpected pregnancies throw couples and their families into turmoil. There are fights over shared washrooms, decisions over whether to stay or quit and go home, and many, many meals of take-out noodles.

TRT: 215 min.

Wang Bing on *Youth (Spring)* by Dennis Lim

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“The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory,” Harun Farocki wrote in 2001, “but a century later it can be said that film is hardly drawn to the factory and is even repelled by it.” Few filmmakers have done as much to redress cinema's historical neglect of labor as the Chinese documentarian Wang Bing. If Wang's momentous debut, the three-part, nine-hour *West of the Tracks (Tie Xi Qu)* (2002), chronicled the decline of an industrial district of state-owned factories, the three-and-a-half-hour *Youth (Spring)*—his first Cannes competition entry, and itself the first of a trilogy—is squarely situated within a private-enterprise China, where new economic structures have engendered new forms of exploitation. Shot between 2014 and 2019, it unfolds almost entirely in the town of Zhili, near Shanghai, a hub of fast-fashion production where migrant workers, mostly in their twenties, toil for long hours in workshops that are typically adjacent to the cramped dormitories where they live. Against the numbing repetition of manual labor, daily dramas (often romantic) erupt and economic realities are continuously foregrounded, not least in the protracted rate negotiations that the low-wage employees are forced to undertake.

Your 2016 film *Bitter Money* and 2017 installation *15 Hours* are both also about garment factories. Did those works come from the same period of shooting as *Youth (Spring)*?

It's the same place. When I first arrived in Zhili, I came up from Yunnan with a few girls I'd met during the shooting of another film, *Three Sisters* (2012). They were going to work there. I had to adapt to and get to know the place. The first footage that I shot became *Bitter Money*. *Youth (Spring)* required a lot of preparation and time, finding funding and getting to know people. When you don't really know how large a project is going to be, sometimes you have to make other films. In *Bitter Money*, some of the people are older. They're not as hopeful; they're more resigned to their fate.

To call the film *Youth* frames the way we read it. At what point did you decide on this title?

You see it in the workshop. Some older people work there, but they're not really the force of the place. They're not that productive. There's also something specific to China: in the mid-20th century, during the revolutionary fervor, especially in art, there was an enormous overuse of the word and the idea of youth, to represent a revolutionary spirit. I wanted to reclaim it from that use and that meaning. The fact is that this sector relies very heavily on this production force—the physical labor of young people.

What was it about the workshops in Zhili that compelled you to commit to an extended shoot?

The first impression I got in Zhili was the heaviness, the difficulty of the work. As you probably know, there's a large migrant population in China, but in most sectors, these workers are in vast factories that are centrally managed and surveilled by the state, almost impossible to get into and film. Some factories employ tens of thousands of people. Zhili, taken as a whole, would be on the same scale. There were 300,000 people working there. But it's structured differently. They have money coming from different factions, and that completely fragments it. It's not one singular place. Each little workshop is like a small private enterprise with its own boss. For a filmmaker, there's much more access. There were 20,000 businesses. Not everybody was going to welcome me, but I found several places without difficulty who didn't mind me filming. The only reason we stopped is that we ran out of budget.

In production facilities in China, it used to be that everything was centrally governed. The system governed everything. If you didn't do the job the way they wanted, you would be punished, disciplined. Now it's not like that. Everything is done through money, and it's much easier to control people through the reward and incentive of money. How much you make depends on how many pieces you make. I saw this man who would make 700 items a day in 13 hours. Even when he was making more complex items, he was making at least 300.

Given the massive amount of material, what were your principles of selection and