

# Dead Souls

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY WANG BING

GRASSHOPPER FILM AND ICARUS FILMS, 2018

DVD, 3 DISCS, 8 HOURS, 15 MINUTES, COLOR

MANDARIN / ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Glenn D. Tiffert

Jiabianguo lies on the edge of the Gobi Desert near the city of Jiuguan, in the northwest pocket of China's Gansu Province. Today, the region is home to China's premier satellite launch center, but from 1957 to 1961, it was the nucleus of a labor camp complex in which more than 80 percent of the prisoners died, mostly of starvation. One of countless sites of mass death during the Mao period (1949–1976), many of which far exceed it in scale, Jiabianguo's history might never have reached us but for a dedicated group of Chinese memoirists, novelists, and filmmakers who are daring their contemporaries not only to learn about the inhumanities that transpired there, but also to reckon with the system that produced them and its legacies in the present.

*Dead Souls* (2018) is the fourth and most ambitious film about Jiabianguo by the acclaimed director Wang Bing.<sup>1</sup> Between 2005 and 2017, Wang conducted 120 interviews with camp survivors, nearly twenty of whom, mostly men, speak at length in the film. He punctuates their testimonies with tearful scenes from a survivor's burial (0:42), the recollections of a former guard (7:20), and several visits to the desolate site of the former camp, now strewn in places with fragments of clothing and bleached human bones. The structure, stylings, and pacing of the eight-hour documentary suggest Claude Lanzmann's epic film about the Holocaust, *Shoah*. However, its title cleverly evokes Gogol's classic satire about moral and spiritual decay in nineteenth-century Russia.

Jiabianguo opened in 1954 as a reform through labor (*laogai*) camp for convicted criminals serving fixed-term sentences. However, in 1957, this population was moved and the facility was restyled a reeducation through labor (*laojiao*) camp in time to receive a surge of prisoners condemned during an intense phase of political persecution known as the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–1958). In theory, reeducation through labor was a lighter, extrajudicial sanction that many workplaces or local committees of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could impose on people administratively. But in reality the severity of its regime was often comparable to reform through labor, and, even worse, its duration was indeterminate, which meant that it could extend as long as authorities saw fit.

The survivors who appear in *Dead Souls* were in their twenties and thirties when the Anti-Rightist Campaign upended their lives. They were the first generation to come of age in the People's Republic and, for a time, enjoyed the opportunities for advancement that the revolution had opened up. Most were "intellectuals," a broad term that could encompass nearly



Zhou Xiaoli in a scene from Wang Bing's *Dead Souls*. Source: Screen capture from a *Dead Souls* trailer on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/y4ceuzkj>. © Grasshopper Film and Icarus Films.

anyone at the time with a high school education or higher, and consequently, they tended to work as midlevel cadres or in learned professions such as journalism or teaching. But the comparatively privileged backgrounds and ties to the old regime that had facilitated their educations left many of them acutely vulnerable as the revolution worked its way through an expanding list of class enemies. In the charged atmosphere of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, when the body politic was required to search out and purify itself of hidden foes, their indiscretions or mild criticisms were construed as conclusive proof of hostility to the CCP.

The survivors appearing in the film generally hew to their own stories, but after an almost-desensitizing procession of similar narratives, their atomistic voices coalesce into a chorus of horrifying truths about revolutionary China. Many people were labeled as rightists not because of any particular animus against the CCP but to satisfy arbitrary quotas, or as a result of minor transgressions or petty workplace grudges and jealousies, which were weaponized by a system that wielded power despotically and that periodically renewed itself through ritual human sacrifice. Once singled out, they endured frenzied denunciations

in public "struggle" meetings that could last for days, at which associates had no choice but to participate energetically lest they themselves arouse suspicions of sympathy for the accused and guilt by association. Altogether, around 190,000 people across Gansu Province were attacked and humiliated in this way, and the figures were still higher in other provinces. A wave of psychological collapses, divorces, and suicides ensued.

Only a small fraction of those labeled as rightists were sent to the camps, but *Dead Souls* establishes that not a few of them arrived at Jiabianguo convinced of their loyalty to the party. They naively hoped that higher authorities would discover and reverse the miscarriages of justice that led to their internments, or at least reward their devotion to self-improvement and hard labor, and soon judge them worthy to return to their former lives. Most could not fathom the scale of the mendacity around them or that the revolution they had served could wantonly turn against them. Promised a heroic opportunity to turn the desert green, they were instead condemned to a forgotten wasteland. Worse, their survival cruelly preserved them as

*Wang Bing's latest is a monumental work of testimony, largely comprised of interviews with survivors of the Jiabianguo and Mingshui re-education camps of the late 1950s, which were set up in the Gobi Desert to imprison alleged reactionaries and anti-Communists a decade after China's revolution in 1949.*

Source: The *Dead Souls* page for the film's premiere at the Lincoln Center, New York City, New York, at <https://www.filmlinc.org/films/dead-souls/>.

targets for later campaigns and burdened their families with protracted discrimination and ostracism. They would struggle to make sense of these betrayals for the remainders of their lives.

*Dead Souls* describes these events unsparingly, including the insults starvation inflicts on the human body and on conventional morality. At first, the rations allocated to prisoners amounted to just under a kilo of grain per day, on which they could survive, especially when supplemented by food sent by their families. But by October 1959, the rations had shrunk to around 250 grams per day. Discipline in the camps collapsed as prisoners grew too weak to work, and then bloated horribly and died. Survivors remember seeing the works of Mao Zedong, Karl Marx, and Vladimir Lenin laying in latrines or burned as fuel, a damning inversion of the ideological reeducation they were meant to receive. But of course, not all suffered or died equally. Kitchen staff devised ingenious strategies for stealing food under the eyes of their watchers and quietly doled out choice morsels to favored comrades. One survivor boasts in the film that fellow prisoners nicknamed him khryushka (“pig” in Russian) since he routinely ate his fill and even grew fat, in part because he worked in the cadres’ kitchen. At the height of the famine, camp cadres enjoyed nearly double the rations of their charges, which left them hungry but alive.

*Dead Souls* does not lend itself to truncated excerpts or sound bites. For teaching purposes, three of its contributors stand out: Zhao Tiemin (4:39), because of the broadly representative and dramatic flavor of his testimony; Li Jinghang (5:46), whose eschatological Christian worldview both stigmatized and sustained him; and Zhu Zhaonan (7:20), a former camp cadre. Since the film assumes familiarity with the broader historical context of the period, it is best paired in the classroom with background material on the 1949 revolution, and more specifically on the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and its associated famine. This framing will equip students to appreciate how a sequence of calamitous policies transformed Jiabiangou from a harsh labor colony into a death camp. Briefly, the CCP first launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign, which purged or cowed its critics, especially by assailing the customary social prestige, moral autonomy, and self-regard of the country’s intellectuals as rightful stewards of the nation. Then, it launched the Great Leap Forward, a disastrous program of crash industrialization and collectivization that precipitated an agricultural collapse, which killed more than thirty million. Gansu was among the provinces hardest hit by this famine, owing to the ideological radicalism of its leadership. Once starvation stalked the population outside of the camps, the fate of those inside was sealed.

Galvanized by the Great Leap Forward, Gansu’s Party leadership not only cut off Jiabiangou’s grain supply and fancifully declared it self-sufficient, but also murderously required it to forfeit a quota of its own production to the state at the expense of its inhabitants. Foreseeably, the camp’s crop failed because the climate was arid, the soil was highly alkaline, and the prisoners grew so hungry that they ate their own seed grain. Since mail was monitored, they did not dare tell their families how dire circumstances had become. In any case, families outside were also going hungry, and the food parcels they sent were often opened and plundered in transit. By the time the CCP began to confront the scale of the disaster sweeping the province (and indeed the country) in late 1960, most of the prisoners at the main Jiabiangou camp had died. The ragged survivors were hastily moved to a satellite camp (Mingshui), where conditions were worse. When they arrived, it was already too late in the season for planting, and, because there was no infrastructure in place to receive them, they spent the harsh winter living in crude, communal pits dug into the earth.

The dying therefore accelerated, and some of the desperate even turned to cannibalism. Within months, new provincial leaders decided to begin



Gao Guifang in a scene from Wang Bing’s *Dead Souls*. Source: Grasshopper Film at <https://tinyurl.com/y4nyrr8r>. © Grasshopper Film and Icarus Films.



Survivors Chen Zonghai and Xi Xiashan burn joss paper offerings to honor those who died at the camp. Source: Screen capture from *Dead Souls* trailer on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/yjowljqq>. © Grasshopper Film and Icarus Films.

releasing prisoners back to their work units to save the few who remained, and over the course of 1961, the camp wound down and closed. The toll was catastrophic; out of a total camp population of around 3,200, approximately 2,700 died. From the city of Tianshui, roughly 300 people went to Jiabiangou, but only about twenty came out, and some work units and districts received no survivors at all. A portion of the city’s educated population had effectively been liquidated. Moreover, those who returned faced the indignity of reintegrating with the workplaces and colleagues that had dispatched them to the camps in the first place. Finally, in 1978, two years after Mao died, the party authorized work units nationwide to lift the “rightist hats” of the accused. According to official figures, more than 99 percent of the 550,000 people so encumbered were ultimately cleared in a fig leaf compromise that upheld the overall legitimacy of the Anti-Rightist Campaign while acknowledging errors in implementation. Then, the CCP closed the book on the Anti-Rightist Campaign and never publicly looked back.

In important ways, Jiabiangou was a microcosm of the nation. Across the early PRC, the party crushed real and imagined enemies while it blindly pursued quixotic fantasies that hastened the deaths of tens of millions. Whether they were trapped in labor camps, towns, or rural people’s communes, the victims of this era were all prisoners. By rescuing their memory from obscurity, artists and activists like Wang Bing are honoring those who suffered injustice and challenging the license of the PRC state to variously erase, sanitize, and repackage their traumas into sources of continuing legitimacy. Hence, *Dead Souls* is not just a deeply political interrogation of the systems of power and morality that made Jiabiangou and similar barbarities possible, but also a prompt to reflect on their uncomfortable echoes in the present.

There are moments in *Dead Souls* when the suppressed tension between past and present erupts. Many graves at Jiabangou were marked with small stones bearing the names of the occupants. With the passage of time, the ink on these stones is fading, effectively anonymizing the associated remains, some of which have surfaced from their shallow graves and are now exposed to the elements. One survivor, Cao Zonghua (1:02), describes a recent attempt by former rightists to gather such remains into a freshly dug resting place marked with a memorial stele on which they had engraved the names of the corresponding dead. After first acceding to the project, local officials withdrew approval, bulldozed the site as an illegal construction, and then blocked future access by building a wall around it. Moreover, Cao avers that he is under surveillance for his activism, a plausible claim, given that the Chinese state rigorously polices historical memory and frequently suppresses even small, independent acts of remembrance as threats to social stability. Undeterred, *Dead Souls* shows human bones (including skulls) scattered elsewhere in the area as if to declare that the story of what transpired at Jiabangou will not remain buried forever.

As oral history, *Dead Souls* provides ample opportunity for viewers to wrestle with the problems of self-representation and positionality, and to explore how the survivors navigate between the rhetorics of agency and victimhood in their testimonies. But by granting survivors a welcome platform from which to speak, the film also leaves much unsaid. For instance, we know that memories are unstable, dialogic constructs. How the survivors talk about and make sense of their experiences in the camps may therefore be different today than it would have been a generation or two ago because their circumstances and the master narratives circulating around them have changed. At the very least, it is evident in the film that the material conditions of their lives have diverged widely, a reflection of how the revolutionary project to which they sacrificed their youths has veered in a very different direction and left many (but not all) behind. More complicated still, one could reasonably expect that many of those sent to Jiabangou actively engaged in and profited from the serial political campaigns that tormented the early PRC before they themselves fell from grace. After all, it was in the nature of Maoist politics to morally

compromise its participants by compelling such complicity, eventually entangling nearly everyone in the dual roles of perpetrator and victim—a strategy that cleverly blurred the distinctions between individual and systemic culpability, and claimed the souls of all. A Chinese audience would likely grasp this subtext, but a foreign one might need clarification.

Because of their unvarnished explorations of sensitive subjects, Wang Bing's films are not typically screened in the PRC, and *Dead Souls* is no exception. While no documentary can hope to fully capture the monstrous history of Jiabangou, the fragments Wang has preserved shock the conscience. Aware of the party's distaste for "historical nihilism" (CCP shorthand for an honest accounting of dark chapters from its past), Wang intentionally made *Dead Souls* with posterity in mind. Several of those who appear in the film passed away before its release, and others will not be with us for much longer. Wang gives their souls new life by helping them speak while they still could, recording what they knew before it was lost so that others can learn from it in time. Considering that the PRC is today silencing internal critics, scrubbing its history with renewed intensity, building vast internment camps in the desert, announcing transformative new leaps into the future, and finding inspiration in the Maoist past, his timing was impeccable. ■

#### NOTES

1. The earlier films are *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (2007), *The Ditch* (2010), and *Traces* (2014). An informative press kit for *Dead Souls* can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/y2h4nht9>.

GLENN D. TIFFERT is a Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and a Historian of Modern China. His research has centered on Chinese legal history, including publications on constitutionalism, the construction of a modern judiciary, and the genealogy of the rule of law in the PRC. His current book manuscript, provisionally titled *Judging Revolution*, radically reinterprets the Mao Era and the 1949 revolution by way of a deep archival dive into the origins of the PRC judicial system. His current research probes the intersections between information technology and authoritarianism, and the ramifications of China's rise for American interests.



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