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Remembering the Ruins: Documentary Practice and Cultural Memory in Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*

Qing Bao¹

¹School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou 730000, China; karmakazi2025@outlook.com; +86 13998653855.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8914-1875>

Address for Correspondence:

Qing Bao, School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou 730000, China. (karmakazi2025@outlook.com; +86 13998653855).

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Abstract As one of the most ambitious works in contemporary Chinese documentary cinema, Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu*, 2003) documents the decline of an industrial district in Shenyang, a major city in northeastern China once known as a center of heavy manufacturing, yet its meaning goes far beyond urban history. This article argues that this film transforms the traces of deindustrialization into shared cultural memory through its observational style and sound design. Drawing on ideas from cultural-memory theory—Halbwachs's view of social frameworks of memory, Assmann's notion of *presentification*, and Nora's *lieux de mémoire*—the analysis shows how everyday images of trains, workshops, and winter streets become mnemonic forms that sustain remembrance. At the same time, the film questions the visual logic of modernization. By placing displaced industrial workers and resettled families in dim, fragmentary frames, Wang Bing exposes the uneven texture of China's modern experience. His images reveal that modernization is not a linear story of progress, but a process that continually produces margins and silences. Viewed through Bill Nichols's notion of "evidentiary editing" and Michael Renov's idea of documentary persuasion, *West of the Tracks* transforms ordinary sights and sounds into a meditation on migration, labor, and loss. It ultimately stands as an archive of how people negotiate memory and belonging in a world of displacement.

Keywords cultural memory; observational documentary; Wang Bing; Chinese film

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Reviewers

Yafei Pang, Department of College English, Foshan University, China. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8224-8875>. Email: pangyafei@fosu.edu.cn

Dr. Ugur Diler, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Istanbul Yeni Yuzyil, Turkey. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2194-0451>. Email: dilerugur@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, Chinese documentary has increasingly turned to the visual traces of disappearance—factories in ruins, emptied dormitories, forgotten streets—to reflect on social change. Among these works, Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu*, 2003) stands as one of the most ambitious attempts to record the human cost of economic reform. As [Arjun Appadurai \(1996\)](#) notes, modernity is marked by constant movement and transformation. *West of the Tracks* reflects this condition, showing how modernization reshapes both space and memory in China. Spanning more than nine hours, the film observes the gradual collapse of a once-flourishing industrial zone in Shenyang and the everyday struggles of workers and families left behind. Its long takes, static framing, and thick soundscape of engines, footsteps, and loudspeakers together create a cinema of endurance, in which duration itself becomes a form of testimony.

The film's power, however, lies not only in its scope but in how it turns material decay into memory. As [Maurice Halbwachs \(1992\)](#) notes, even the most private recollections depend on social frameworks that give them shape and legitimacy. [Jan Assmann \(2011\)](#) expands this idea through the concept of *presentification*, arguing that media reactivate the past by placing it within new cultural contexts. *West of the Tracks* exemplifies this process: its images of snow, smoke, and silence transform transient experiences of loss into shareable memory. [Pierre Nora's \(1989\)](#) notion of *lieux de mémoire*—sites where history condenses into symbolic form—further illuminates how the film's factories and railways serve as mnemonic landscapes after lived memory has faded. As [Dai Jinhua \(2012\)](#) notes, contemporary Chinese visual culture often rewrites history through the lens of personal memory. *West of the Tracks* participates in this process, transforming collective narratives of industrialization into intimate acts of remembrance.

At the same time, the film questions the visual logic of modernization. By situating migrant workers and displaced families within frames of obscurity or partial light, Wang exposes the uneven presence of voices and images in reform-era narratives. His camera neither glorifies nor condemns; it attends to the overlooked details—the dust, the idle gestures, the lingering noise—that mark social invisibility. This observational patience invites viewers to perceive the slow violence of transition without didactic commentary.

In recent years, international scholarship has increasingly examined how documentary cinema mediates cultural memory through visual and sonic form. [Diane Charleson's *Filmmaking as Research: Screening Memories* \(2019\)](#) highlights the ways film practice translates personal and collective recollection into affective experience, while [Jihoon Kim's \(2024\) *Activism and Post-activism: Korean Documentary Cinema, 1981–2022* \(2024\)](#) traces an aesthetic turn toward “memoryscapes” in Asian documentary. Within the Chinese context, [Courage \(2016\)](#) explores how independent filmmakers transform urban mobility and spatial decay into a language of remembrance, and [Zhang \(2021\)](#) analyzes how local documentary practices reconstruct identity through memory and place. Together, these studies indicate a broader international interest in the aesthetic dimensions of remembrance.

The following analysis approaches *West of the Tracks* as both documentary and cultural text. Drawing selectively on documentary theory—[Nichols's \(2010\)](#) idea of “evidentiary editing,” [Renov's \(1993\)](#) four functions of documentary, and [Bruzzi's \(2006\)](#) performative turn—I examine how Wang's camera and sound design construct memory through observation rather than explanation. The aim is not to add new theory but to clarify how form itself remembers. In turning industrial decline into a sensory and temporal experience, *West of the Tracks* demonstrates that documentary is not only a mirror of reality but also a medium through which a society learns how to remember.

2. Watching and the Trigger of Memory

My first encounter with *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu*) was through a brief online clip—trains pushing through snow, vapor drifting above the roofs, the image softened by age. Years later, when I visited a railway town in Heilongjiang with my father, he pointed to a street and said, “It still feels the same as before.” His remark echoed what Wang Bing's film conveys: memory is not confined to the mind; it inhabits spaces and sensory impressions that reawaken it. The weathered station and the film's wintry streets overlapped in my perception, collapsing the distance between personal recollection and a collective past.

This experience illuminates the social nature of remembering. [Maurice Halbwachs \(1992\)](#) reminds us that individual memory exists only within social frameworks; we recall “with” others even when we appear alone. [Jan Assmann \(2011\)](#) develops this insight through the notion of *presentification*—the way media reactivate the past within current horizons of meaning. In that moment on the platform, both the physical place and Wang's images operated as media

of recall: they enabled a shared recognition between generations. *West of the Tracks* thus functions not merely as a document of industrial decline but as a cultural apparatus that organizes scattered memories into collective visibility.

The film's capacity to awaken such recognition lies in its observational form. Wang's camera does not instruct or explain; it attends. Long takes linger on the movement of smoke, the creak of rails, the weary gestures of workers. These ordinary durations are what [Andrei Tarkovsky \(1986\)](#) calls the "sculpting of time": the act of giving time a visible body. Through this patient gaze, the film makes memory palpable—not through narration, but through endurance. The viewer begins to feel history as texture: snow settling on rusted tracks, steam swallowing the frame, a worker's silent glance toward the camera.

At the same time, the film transforms the viewer's position from spectator to participant. Watching *West of the Tracks* is less an act of observation than of dwelling. The slow rhythms invite the audience to inhabit the same temporality as the filmed subjects—to breathe the cold air, to listen to the mechanical hum that fills the silence. In this sense, Wang's cinema fulfills what [Astrid Erll \(2011\)](#) calls the "generative function" of cultural memory: it not only stores recollection but generates new affective connections across time. My own encounter with the film repeated this mechanism. The familiar sound of the train did not simply recall a place; it reorganized my sense of belonging, linking a personal past to a collective archive of industrial life.

Through these layered experiences, *West of the Tracks* shows that documentary can operate as a site where memory is both remembered and produced. It does not rely on explicit commentary or historical data; rather, it lets the everyday surface—snow, steam, fatigue—carry the weight of remembrance. What emerges is a shared temporality between filmmaker, subject, and viewer. Thus, to remember is also to witness. Within this framework of cultural memory, the film transforms industrial ruins into a site where history condenses into image and sound, allowing private recollection to merge with collective continuity.

3. Rethinking Documentary: "Yanfen Street," Sound, and Visibility

For many viewers educated on television or classroom "science films," documentary long appeared synonymous with objectivity—an authoritative voice, polished narration, and the promise of truth. *West of the Tracks* overturns this expectation. Wang Bing's camera enters cramped rooms and narrow lanes, staying close to workers, teenagers, and families whose lives unfold on the margins of reform. The "Yanfen Street" sequence makes this shift tangible: young people play, flirt, and argue in small shops; they write awkward poems and talk about uncertain futures. In these fleeting gestures, memory adheres to the ordinary. The film thus transforms the overlooked everyday into what [Halbwachs \(1992\)](#) would call a *social framework* of remembrance.

Sound is central to this transformation. In one striking passage, a local official reads a demolition policy in a meeting hall; in the next shot, the same speech blares from a loudspeaker over the street. The acoustic bridge collapses distance between authority and everyday life. We hear policy turning into presence. Tenants appear below, dismantling bricks and wires, arguing over compensation, while the loudspeaker continues overhead. Through editing, Wang creates what [Bill Nichols \(2010\)](#) terms "evidentiary montage": separate fragments arranged to construct meaning without commentary. The film visualizes the friction between modernization and everyday life. The loudspeaker that repeats a demolition policy merges with the noise of streets and factories, creating an acoustic image of modernity—one where progress and displacement coexist. In this soundscape, modernization becomes audible as contradiction: policy promises development, while its echoes announce dislocation.

The sonic environment intensifies this asymmetry. Factory noise, truck engines, and random pop songs mix with fragments of propaganda, forming what [Renov \(1993\)](#) describes as documentary's persuasive and expressive functions. Persuasion here is not rhetorical but affective: it is the soundscape that convinces. Through repetition, the film translates governance into noise, making power audible as atmosphere. The viewer does not simply watch the displacement; they inhabit it acoustically.

This use of sound and image also recalls [Dai Jinhua's \(2012\)](#) observation that camera position is never neutral. In *West of the Tracks*, the camera often stands at eye level but remains physically constrained—wedged in corners, half-obstructed by walls. Such framing mirrors the workers' limited agency, while also granting them visibility denied elsewhere. The result is a paradoxical equality: to share the same confined space is to share vulnerability.

Finally, the "Yanfen Street" scenes reveal how documentary can create memory rather than simply record it. As [Assmann \(2011\)](#) and [Nora \(1989\)](#) suggest, media transform transient experience into revisitable sites of meaning. Doorways, loudspeakers, and winter alleys become mnemonic anchors—forms through which viewers recall not

only the city's decline but their own encounters with transition. Through these small coordinates, Wang Bing turns a local street into a cultural site where the invisible becomes visible and the ephemeral becomes part of collective remembrance.

4. Images as Anchors of Memory

Old photographs often bear the marks of time—faded colors, blurred edges, stiff poses. Yet these imperfections make them powerful carriers of remembrance. A single image can hold an entire era, not because it preserves reality perfectly but because it provides a point of return. In *West of the Tracks*, Wang Bing achieves a similar effect. His images of soot-covered factories, frozen railways, and dimly lit rooms resemble living photographs—frames in which the past refuses to vanish.

The film's visual texture evokes the process of *presentification*—the reanimation of the past within the present. The low-contrast colors, slow exposure, and grainy surfaces seem to hover between memory and documentation, between the remembered and the recorded. Each shot thus functions as a visual “memory anchor,” allowing audiences to revisit spaces that have materially disappeared. When a worker's face emerges from steam or a train push slowly through snow, the image no longer describes a moment—it reactivates it.

Following this theoretical line of thought on cultural memory, the film transforms the industrial district itself into a symbolic landscape where history condenses into image and sound. The closed plants and abandoned dormitories cease to be ruins; they become symbolic landscapes where personal histories and national narratives overlap. The camera's stillness lets these spaces accumulate time, as if the long take itself were a ritual of remembrance. The affective power of these images extends beyond the film itself. In the decades following *West of the Tracks*, a similar visual sensibility began to circulate online—what came to be known as the “liminal-space” aesthetic. Like Wang's lingering shots of deserted factories, these digital images evoke an uncanny sense of familiarity and loss. Both transform emptiness into a vessel of memory, suggesting that the emotional logic of Wang's cinema continues to resonate in new media environments.

This approach also challenges conventional ideas of progress. By refusing fast editing or explanatory narration, Wang's long takes resist the accelerated rhythm of modernity—the expectation that images should move quickly, deliver information, and affirm development. Instead, his camera lingers, granting duration to those left behind. The result is a counter-archive of modernization, one that privileges slowness, endurance, and opacity as modes of historical truth.

The later online fascination with “liminal spaces”—empty corridors, bluish windows, concrete stairwells—echoes this same sensibility. Detached from geography, these digital images perform a comparable mnemonic function: they invite collective recognition of transience. *West of the Tracks* thus demonstrates how documentary images, precisely through their incompleteness, preserve the emotional contour of an era. In the haze of steam and the hum of engines, memory finds a surface on which to rest.

5. Camera and Sound: The Aesthetics of Observation

Across the nine hours of *West of the Tracks*, the movement of the camera is remarkably restrained. It seldom tracks or zooms; instead, it waits. When space is still, the camera remains still; when people move, it follows only as much as necessary to stay with them. This slow rhythm creates what [Stella Bruzzi \(2006\)](#) calls *performative realism*: a mode in which truth emerges not from objective detachment but from shared duration. The camera's patience allows the viewer to inhabit the same temporal rhythm as the filmed subjects—an ethics of proximity rather than intrusion.

The wide-angle compositions reinforce this intimacy. Rather than isolating faces in close-up, Wang frames entire rooms: the cluttered furniture, peeling walls, the dim light of a single bulb. These frames resemble human perception—peripheral, inclusive, unfinished. They preserve what [Louis Giannetti \(2014\)](#) terms the “ambiguity of lived experience,” allowing the environment to speak alongside the people within it. In these scenes, observation becomes empathy; the act of looking is transformed into an act of co-presence. This ethics of seeing extends naturally into Wang's use of sound, where listening becomes another mode of observation.

If the still image invites the viewer to share time with the filmed subjects, sound allows them to share space. Sound extends this participation. For long stretches, there is no music, only the continuous grind of engines, footsteps, and murmured conversation. The noise is not ornamental—it is environmental, what [Nichols \(2010\)](#) calls the “sonic evidence” of reality. Viewers do not simply *hear* these sounds; they are surrounded by them. The texture of noise

clings to the body like dust, translating material exhaustion into acoustic experience. As [Wang Jing \(2020\)](#) observes, the interplay of silence and direct sound in *West of the Tracks* transforms industrial noise into testimony—a sonic form of historical memory.

Within this broader soundscape, Wang occasionally allows irony to emerge not through commentary but through acoustic contrast. One such moment occurs in a dormitory scene where shirtless workers complain about pollution while, in the background, a radio confidently proclaims “revitalizing the nation through science and education.” The dissonance between these two registers—the body’s fatigue and the optimism of ideology—condenses the contradiction of reform. Wang lets this clash resonate without intervention, fulfilling [Renov’s \(1993\)](#) insight that documentary persuades not through argument but through structure: here, meaning arises from juxtaposition.

The most striking moment remains an “exception” in the *Railway* section. Du Yang lies on his bed, clutching a photograph of his mother and weeping uncontrollably. For once, Wang Bing departs from his usual restraint and inserts a piece of rough electronic music whose source is uncertain and seemingly non-diegetic. The sound is cheap, repetitive, and without progression—a coarse pulse of what might be called a “defective modernity” resonating through the air of a transitional era. This melody can be read in multiple ways: as an emotional amplifier that translates unspeakable pain into noise; as a Brechtian device of estrangement reminding viewers that they are watching a constructed text; and as a metaphor for the texture of the time itself—raw, anxious, and suspended in development. Brief yet piercing, the sequence represents the director’s rare “violation” after long restraint and becomes the film’s cruelest annotation. It exposes not only the collapse of an individual but also the distorted echo that an era leaves to its next generation. Through such choices, Wang Bing constructs a complex acoustic world that replaces commentary with presence. The camera’s stillness and the sound’s persistence together produce a quiet ethics of attention: an insistence on looking and listening to those who would otherwise remain unseen. In this aesthetic of observation, the film transforms perception itself into an ethical act—seeing as recognition, listening as remembrance.

6. Contrast, Montage, and the Tragedy of Father and Son

One of the most haunting sequences in *West of the Tracks* occurs when Du Xiyun, a laid-off worker recently released from prison, reunites with his son Du Yang. What begins as a modest family meal descends into chaos as alcohol, humiliation, and despair surface. Later that night, Du Xiyun carries his son home on his back; in the dark room, the son sobs hoarsely while the father, half-speaking to the camera, recounts his own failures. The moment is unbearable in its intimacy. The camera does not cut or intervene—it simply stays, letting emotion unfold within real time.

This scene encapsulates Wang Bing’s use of contrast as a structural principle. Throughout the film, he juxtaposes fire and frost, noise and silence, motion and stillness. Here, the emotional contrast replaces the physical: tenderness collides with violence, love with degradation. The quiet of the room amplifies the son’s broken voice; the father’s attempt at consolation becomes a confession of defeat. As [Sergei Eisenstein \(1969\)](#) suggested, montage is not merely an editing technique but a way of thinking—meaning arises from collision. Wang’s montage of opposites creates not resolution but rupture, a cinematic equivalent of memory’s pain.

The tragedy also embodies the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Du Xiyun’s humiliation—unemployment, imprisonment, and social marginalization—passes silently to his son. This inheritance echoes what [Maurice Halbwachs \(1992\)](#) calls the *collective dimension of memory*: suffering is never purely personal but part of a shared historical frame. The father and son do not speak of politics, yet their gestures reveal the emotional residue of structural violence. The son’s breakdown mirrors a society where industrial identity has collapsed, leaving individuals to bear its invisible weight.

The visual composition deepens this reading. The dim lighting, the narrow space, and the static frame enclose the two bodies as if in a confessional. The camera’s refusal to move prevents aesthetic distance; it forces the viewer to stay with the pain. The father-son encounter embodies the human cost of modernization. The breakdown of the industrial order has fractured not only communities but also family bonds. Their embrace, caught in dim light, visualizes how modernity transmits its violence not through ideology but through emotion—across generations and within the body. Wang Bing transforms this moment into a human record of modernity’s contradiction: progress shadowed by loss.

A parallel can be drawn to Ilya Repin’s painting *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan* (1885). In Repin’s canvas, the father’s horror and the son’s death are frozen in a single, eternal moment. Wang Bing’s camera achieves a similar

stillness through duration. The embrace between Du Xiyun and Du Yang is not redemption but recognition: history, too, holds its victims. Through the unbroken take, the film converts individual despair into collective memory. The father's trembling body, illuminated by a faint bulb, becomes what [Pierre Nora \(1989\)](#) would call a *site of memory*—a space where the weight of time, grief, and love converge into a single, unforgettable image.

7. Conclusion: Memory, Migration, and the Work of Documentary

As [Lü Xinyu \(2004\)](#) reminds us, *West of the Tracks* does not simply mourn the past but reveals the structural contradictions of China's modernization, where history's progress inevitably produces loss. *West of the Tracks* is not merely a chronicle of industrial decay; it is a meditation on how people remember amid disappearance. Through long takes, static framing, and an immersive soundscape, Wang Bing transforms fragments of everyday life into forms of cultural memory—remembrances sustained through media and shared symbols. Factories, trains, and corridors become mnemonic forms: images that enable the past to remain visible even after its material traces have gone.

The film also redefines what it means to witness. Rather than presenting information, it creates an affective space where observation becomes participation. The still camera and persistent sound turn the viewer from an observer into a companion, experiencing with the subjects the slow erosion of work, home, and belonging. In this sense, *West of the Tracks* fulfills [Renov's \(1993\)](#) description of documentary as a practice that records, persuades, analyzes, and expresses simultaneously. Its persuasion is not argumentative but emotional; its expression lies in silence.

What emerges is a cinematic archive of migration and displacement. Although the film never explicitly speaks of "migration," its images of departure, waiting, and loss reveal the mobility that defines contemporary China. Workers leave their homes not only physically but symbolically—displaced from the social structures that once anchored their identity. In turning these ruptures into visible and audible forms, Wang's work performs the essential labor of documentary: it organizes perception so that the invisible can be seen, the unspoken can be remembered.

As [Pierre Nora \(1989\)](#) observes, sites of memory arise when living environments dissolve. *West of the Tracks* captures this moment of dissolution and converts it into continuity. The film's endurance—its refusal to hurry, its patience with time—allows memory to take root in the image itself. As [Bruno Lessard \(2018\)](#) points out, Wang Bing's cinema situates Chinese documentary between history and labor—recording the human dimension of modernization while confronting its erasures. In doing so, it anticipates a broader wave of Chinese migration documentaries that would follow in the 2000s and 2010s, each grappling with how mobility reshapes belonging. Wang Bing's film thus stands not only as a document of the past but as a framework for future remembrance—a reminder that in every act of looking, there is also an act of keeping. In Wang Bing's cinema, memory does not seek closure; it lingers, like the echo of a passing train.

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Author Biography

Qing Bao is a postgraduate student at the School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University. His research interests include Chinese cinema, documentary film, and translation studies.

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