

***San Zimei (Three Sisters)* DVD Film Review by Kino Ken of May, 2024**

12 of a possible 24 points = a mediocre film

**China 2012 color 153 minutes subtitled live action feature documentary
Album Productions / Chinese Shadows Producers: Sylvie Faguer, Hui Mao
an Icarus Films dvd release**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Wang Bing**
- 0 Editing: Wang Bing and Adam Kerby**
- 2 Cinematography: Wang Bing, Wenhai Huang, Peifeng Li**
- 1 Lighting**
- 1 Writer: Wang Bing**
- 2 Locations**
- 2 Sound: Kang Fu**
- 1 Cast: Yingying, age 10; Zhenzhen, age 6; Fenfen, age 4: Sun Shanbao, their father; Grandfather; Auntie; Two Male Cousins; Mayor of Xiyangtang; others**
- 1 Creativity**
- 1 Insightfulness**

12 total points

Wang Bing's protracted documentary *San Zimei (Three Sisters)* brings audiences a relentlessly close-up view of rustic life in China's Yunnan Province. Yunnan borders volatile Myanmar, making it currently a potential reservoir for minority refugees and guerilla fighters from that beleaguered nation. Twelve years ago, though, it was a placid backwater, with an educational system verging on total collapse and an economy ruinously close to dipping below subsistence level.

Herding pigs and goats isn't an enriching experience anywhere. Despite grandiose views of mountains and valleys similar to Alpine foothills, eldest sister Yingying has severely limited options to pursue in a totalitarian stronghold.

It doesn't help that her mom has abandoned the trio of sisters featured here. On top of that desertion, the People's Republic of China shows no sincere interest whatsoever in their health, education, or nourishment.

Yingying's family struggles with racking coughs, inadequate food, frequently absent adult supervision, proliferating lice, and a woefully unprepared official instructor who can only recite propaganda at nerve-racking volume from outdated textbooks. Studying is nearly impossible for Yingying. Daylight hours outside school must be devoted mainly to animal husbandry, food processing, collecting firewood, harvesting ripened cereal crops, and nitpicking. Attendance at a village school brings no true relief. For there she is obviously treated as an impoverished social outcast dependent on handouts from others. When the girl attempts to memorize material from a deteriorating schoolbook in the evening, Grandfather offers no encouragement. He considers her inclined to laziness, using reading as an excuse to evade work and escape from the realities, dismal as they are, of a limited hardscrabble existence. Yingying is in his eyes more a drag than an asset to their extended family.

When Papa comes home briefly, he brings along badly needed new clothes and actually tries to clean up children who rarely take a bath and probably have little access even to soap, let alone shampoo and deodorants. All too soon, he's off again to an unnamed city by bus, accompanied by his two youngest offspring. He's probably unwilling to leave them in the care of Yingying and Auntie, who are neither able nor inclined to devote attention fulltime to that frequently squabbling, obstinately self-centered pair.

Leaving his eldest to Grandfather's lookout is like matching scissors to rock. The two remaining householders grate on each other. Grandpa is neither crusty nor doting. More a devotee, perhaps, of tough love. He's materialistic, rugged, directing. While granddaughter is dreamy, physically tired much of the time, taciturn, fundamentally introverted.

Then there's Yingying's own possibly abrasive personality. In a highly staged scene, one much smaller and younger child accuses Yingying of physically striking her. The older girl's stab at verbal defense is unconvincing. It appears she's potentially unloading personal frustration through bullying weaker individuals. Judging by tartness of remarks made by the accuser's mom, at least some members of their adult community believe Yingying is too pushy and far from accommodatingly cooperative.

Matters go from bad to worse when Dad comes back home with a woman from the city. He found no employment there, but did succeed in persuading the mother of a girl looking to be about Zhenzhen's age to join his household as surrogate parent / cook.

Such a turn of events only creates more friction. Yingying feels her value as child manager, chef and problem-solver drop to zero. She could hardly be buoyed by paternal depreciation of her culinary talent, even if his comment was intended simply as a joke.

Though some reviewers have claimed the children ignore constant presence of a cameraman alternately invading their home and tracking ahead or behind them outside, that clearly isn't the case. Yingying, in particular, quite significantly looks behind several times as if to assure herself the camera is indeed recording her movements. This may be as close as she will ever come to stardom. She wants to capitalize on it.

Director Bing makes no comment on what he observes other than inclusion of a scene where the hamlet's mayor pessimistically informs citizens their taxes will increase in order to cover health care and electrical wiring costs. If they can't meet these demands, the Party will take crops or animals as substitute payments. There's no rebellious complaint forthcoming. People without any weapons other than words feel helpless against political machinery armed to the teeth.

Aside from lacking any novel insights into problems of China's farmers, this film rambles far too long without any cushioning dramatic developments or even comic touches. Its central character remains enigmatic. Most other individuals are permitted only cursory disclosures of opinions. No significant changes occur onscreen. In their place, a strong sense of stasis becomes the prevailing ambience. Lacking forward momentum, the movie becomes somewhat of an endurance contest for viewers. That is definitely not a recommendation.

Icarus Films' dvd release does include a sixteen-page booklet with ten stills from the motion picture, include a centerfold. However, the bulk of its text focuses on Director Bing's life and career rather than this specific film release.

Three Sisters is a fairly disappointing window into twenty-first century life in Communist China. Due to one instance of obscene language, torpid pacing, and

a trailer bonus including a second injection of verbal obscenity, this dvd is not suitable for juvenile audiences.