CAPTURING THE MEMORYSCAPE: ALTERNATIVE VISUAL DISCOURSE AND THE DOCUMENTARIES OF HU JIE AND WANG BING

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ABSTRACT

Alternative Chinese film culture has become increasingly diverse since the 1990s. This diversification is related to the kinds of films being produced and to who has ‘the right’ to make and to view them. A significant number of new films are documentaries, distinct in form from the newsreels (xinwen pian) or special topic films (zhuanti pian) that represent the more traditional official forms of documentary. Some of these new unofficial (non-state funded) documentaries have attempted to create alternative space for the telling of individual stories about sensitive and traumatic historical periods such as the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution. Such stories are in marked contrast to official visual histories of these periods.

This paper’s focus is the new alternative space created by two individual filmmakers, Hu Jie and Wang Bing, who have documented unofficial, individual histories. Three of their films are examined in the context of a film industry that offers them severely limited or no access at all to official channels of distribution. The paper begins by examining the manner in which historical narratives have been and are ongoingly integral to the construction of a specific official view of the Chinese nation. Such official narratives are dominant in state-run environments, such as schools and in the media, and they tend to drown out any attempted alternative narratives.

Hu Jie and Wang Bing stand out, even within alternative film culture, as filmmakers willing to challenge official doctrine and history. The narrative styles of three of their films are closely analyzed with a view to understanding how and why their work differs from that of official historical narratives. The approaches taken by the two filmmakers are also compared and contrasted. A major aspect of this project has been the translation of Hu Jie’s film In Search of Soul of Lin Zhao into English. The other two films examined have already been translated.

This paper argues that by privileging the individual narrative, the two filmmakers present more complex versions of traumatic historical periods that stand in contrast to the often idealized or superficial official histories.
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To be able to look back upon one's life in satisfaction, is to live twice. Kahlil Gibran.

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1 INTRODUCTION

When visiting China, for even a short length of time, one will inevitably see monuments to revolutionary heroes, martyrs and movements. A prime example is the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square, a large obelisk completed in 1958. It charts the historical rise of revolutionary movements in 19th and 20th century China, beginning with the First Opium War in 1839 and ending with the 1949 liberation of China by the Communist Party (Denton 2000: 224). Although the carved reliefs on the monument depict each of these ‘people’s movements,’ there are no recognizable individuals represented. All of the figures have faces that are “idealized archetypes” intended to “stand for a collective body of people.” (Wu 2005: 32) By connecting specific early revolutionary events to the 1949 triumph of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the monument implies that the rise of the CCP was a predestined step in the path of Chinese history. It acts as a kind of “revolutionary calendar…a frame of reference for all possible memory.” (Wu 2005: 34) Narratives emphasizing this seeming inevitability are commonly found in official state histories.

Many of the events depicted on the Monument to the People’s Heroes and in other forms of official state narrative are in actual fact events that were extremely traumatic for large segments of the Chinese population. One might say, therefore, that the manner in which traumatic events, both current and in particular historical, are depicted continues to play a significant role in conferring ongoing official state power in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Many of the official narratives found in monuments, paintings and museums rely heavily on visual media, perhaps because of the ease and speed with which the visual can communicate messages to both literate and illiterate viewers. As newer
technologies of representation, such as film and other multimedia, have become available, they have also been used to represent the official vision.

In spite of the predominance of state-approved versions, visual historical narratives in China have not been limited to the official domain; producers of counternarratives increasingly make effective use of multimedia and the visual, adopting technologies such as personal video recorders and the internet as they have emerged. Such new technologies have opened unofficial channels through which filmic counternarratives can reach Chinese people, particularly more educated people who tend to live in urban areas. Still, the number of Chinese viewers for these counternarratives is limited when compared to the Chinese population as a whole. The government continues to create its own official narratives while preventing the distribution of counternarratives, particularly those that discuss especially sensitive topics.

Subjects that are considered taboo include, for example, systematic examinations of traumatic historical events such as the Cultural Revolution or the Anti-Rightist Campaign.¹ Much of the Chinese film industry and its distribution channels are controlled through government observation and funding. Thus, in order for films to gain permission for wider distribution, they must first be approved by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). (Pickowicz 2006: 11) For filmmakers who choose to pursue taboo topics, and for those people who choose to tell their personal histories, it is still rather difficult to gain an audience because such voices are suppressed

¹ Michael Berry has an interesting perspective on trauma in China, categorizing traumatic events as examples of either centripetal or centrifugal trauma. In this conception, centripetal refers to externally derived trauma (for example, colonial violence), while centrifugal refers to internally derived trauma (for example, the Cultural Revolution). (Berry 2008)
in official narratives and excluded by official distribution channels. In spite of these obstacles, films that examine difficult historical periods are creating an alternative space where people can reclaim personal memories and histories, in a way that is distinct from mainstream market-driven or state-driven historical projects.

Yomi Braester has noted that some Chinese filmmakers, Jia Zhangke for example, have recently been attempting to record the massive physical changes occurring in Chinese cities. In so doing they “are increasingly self-conscious of their role in preserving a record of the vanishing cityscape.” (165) Similarly, Hu Jie 胡杰 (b. 1958) and Wang Bing 王兵 (b. 1967) the two Chinese filmmakers whose documentaries will form the main focus of my thesis, are artists acting in a conscious manner to preserve what I term, drawing on Gary G. Xu’s concept of sinascape, the vanishing ‘memoryscape’ of their elders. (Xu 2007: 16) By memoryscape, I mean the millions of narratives that form china’s collective memory. Elderly trauma survivors who share their stories may perhaps be likened to demolition sites in China: the “scars in spatial form left by traumatic events.” The aging men and women who are the focus of the camera are the human, spiritual kin of the “vanishing urban spaces [that] hold up against the viewer images that have already internalized their own ruin.” Like the disappearing cityscapes, the elderly subjects of Hu and Wang’s documentaries are nearing the ends of their lives, but they are still present and able to offer their memories up for posterity. Hu and Wang, seemingly driven by a kind of archival impulse, are preserving these individual stories that are part of a larger collective memoryscape while the people are still present and able to tell their stories, so that “the camera becomes the only means of stopping or at least slowing down the process of forgetting.” (Braester 2007: 165)
The memoryscape being archived by Hu and Wang is distinct from state-driven products that tend to shape collective Chinese historical discourse. Individual memories are variable and therefore, simply by being voiced, often function as critiques of collective attempts to place trauma into the framework of a sentimental, melodramatic grand narrative in which the trauma is long past and has already healed. (Wang 2004:12) By preserving the memories of individuals through independent filmmaking, Hu and Wang are contributing to a pluralism of information in China and are creating an alternative historical archive that, while presently not easily accessible to the average Chinese citizen, serves as a record, “anticipating different lines of horizon – memories of the future.” (Wang 2004: 3)

The three documentary films I have chosen as examples of attempts to capture China’s memoryscape are: In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao (Xunzhao Lin Zhao de linghun) (2005) and Though I Am Gone (Wo sui siqu) (2007), both directed by Hu Jie, and Fengming: A Chinese Memoir (He Fengming) (2006), directed by Wang Bing. In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao tells the story of Lin Zhao, a woman who, in 1957 during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, was herself labeled a rightist after speaking out against the treatment of rightist classmates. After being imprisoned for much of the next decade, she was eventually executed in 1968. The film attempts to reconstruct her life through extensive interviews with classmates and colleagues, as well as through Lin Zhao’s own extant prison writings. Though I Am Gone is about the death of Bian Zhongyun, vice principal of the Girl’s Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University. In 1966, early in the Cultural Revolution, Bian was beaten to death by her students. Shortly after her death, Bian’s husband, Wang Jingyao, took photographs of her naked, beaten body.
For decades Wang has saved evidence of the murder, hoping to someday get some kind of justice. The film is built around Wang’s own photographs and uses interviews and archival footage extensively as well. *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* is about He Fengming, an elderly woman who, along with her husband, was sent to a labour camp during the Anti-Rightist Campaign. While she survived the ordeal, her husband did not. *Fengming* is more than three hours long and consists almost entirely of a single, static shot of Fengming sitting on her couch and telling her story. There is no archival footage or other documentation.

All three of the documentaries I have chosen involve extensive interviews with elderly people who lived through numerous political campaigns and traumatic experiences in recent Chinese history. All of them revolve around the death of an individual and recount the long-lasting impact that a single death can have. In spite of these similarities, Hu and Wang have taken very different approaches to filmmaking.

As will be discussed in greater detail in the body of the thesis, the most obvious distinctions between the two director’s films are: (1) Hu Jie makes extensive use of editing, while Wang Bing prefers extremely minimalist editing; and (2) Hu Jie frequently uses visual and aural documentation in the form of photographs and archival footage, while Wang Bing prefers extended long takes of a single subject, with no outside documentation. Based on these two major distinctions Wang Bing’s approach to filmmaking can be considered an attempt to present ‘unmediated trauma,’ where an individual’s personal perception and telling of his or her history supersedes or exists apart from the need for outside sources. This approach is distinct from Hu Jie’s method, which can be considered an attempt to present ‘contextualized trauma’ where a personal history
is presented with outside sources and is directly connected to a wider historical context.

In Chapter 2, I begin with a discussion of the use of history and trauma in the construction of the PRC, including a discussion of some examples of official visual discourse, including a comic book retelling of Sanyuanli, a historical event whose narrative has remained consistent in form from 1949 to the present day. I also discuss two contemporary state-produced films, *Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye*) and *Tian’anmen*, which were produced by the state-owned China Film Group specifically to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Communist Party in China in 2009.

In Chapter 3, I briefly summarize the development of film in China and the current state of the independent film industry, with a particular focus on the distribution of these films and their audiences. The issue of audiences is crucial to the study of both independent and state-produced films, but the question of who exactly is seeing either type of film is difficult to answer definitively. Nonetheless, I attempt to describe how independent films are currently being consumed, and where.

In Chapter 4, which constitutes the core of my study, I look at the films of Hu Jie and Wang Bing. Through close readings of their documentaries, I demonstrate how they function as counternarratives to official visual discourse; the films create alternative spaces for unofficial voices to be heard, within the context of a film industry largely dominated by official voices. Both Hu Jie and Wang Bing have made films that cannot be distributed through official channels, and both filmmakers recognize the role of technology and of the individual in the construction of history. Thus their films are interesting examples of different contemporary approaches to the recording and preservation of forgotten or ignored individual memories.
In Chapter 5 the thesis concludes with a brief summary, as well as a discussion of the documentaries of Hu and Wang. I attempt to address some of the following questions: Are their films effective critiques of ingrained historical narratives, and are they aesthetically successful? Why are the subjects of their films now willing to participate in the documentaries? Finally, what are the prospects for the future development of this kind of filmmaking in Mainland China?

In Chapter 6, I provide an annotated translation of *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao*, as well as excerpts from a supplemental article. Both of the other two films discussed in this thesis have already been translated into English.
2 OFFICIAL VISUAL DISCOURSE

2.1 Visuality, Narrative and the Construction of the State

One can define collective memory as that which arises “when groups come to share the same form of textual mediation,” that is to say, “a shared set of cultural tools” such as literary devices, narrative forms, or visual metaphors. (Wertsch 2000: 9) Because the state in China has generally been in control of large proportions of the mass media and of the educational system, both of which are vectors for the transmission of canonical state narratives, the manner in which the PRC recounts its collective history and traumas is crucial to understanding how it constructs Chinese national history and identity, forming a collective memory.

The construction of national history is not something confined to the Chinese case. It is a process that occurs in most, if not all, modern states that invest large amounts of time and money into the creation of an official history. (Wertsch 2000: 5) The construction of official history, in addition to its primary goal of legitimizing the state’s existence, also attempts to override “local identities and tendencies…to create a loyal homogeneous citizenry…to generate the impression of a unifying essence that binds all the citizens of a state together into one seamless whole.” (Wertsch 2000: 10) Given that the construction of collective memory is largely accomplished through educational systems that instill belief in a collective nation with a collective history, one can see why Benedict Anderson conceived of nationalism and nation-states as “imagined communities.” (Anderson 1991) In this conception, nationalism is something that initially developed in tandem with the printing press, a new technology that allowed for increasingly efficient circulation of vernacular mass media. This helped to bridge
regional differences and dialects, and formed the basis for a collective self-imagination, creating nations that, although real, were also essentially imagined, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson 1991: 6-7) The power of these imagined communities to influence and control large populations has been demonstrated repeatedly in many of the brutal conflicts of the 20th century. Such power is desirable for any state, but especially for authoritarian states that wish to harness symbols, particularly historical national narratives, that can legitimize their rule and undergird the national structure. Such national narratives typically depict the nation as “a self-same ancient entity evolving into the collective subject of the modern nation-state,” and having control over such narratives gives the power to “transform the meanings of a culture and community, [producing] history not only as the past but also for the future.” (Duara 1995: 229, 235)

There is a long tradition in China of using the past to comment upon the present. This tradition has continued under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has made use of traumatic historical events in order to construct patriotic, nationalistic narratives that lend legitimacy to the Party leadership and make it seem the inevitable result of historical evolution, hence the logical saviour of the people. (Denton 2000: 204) While the specific form of these official narratives has varied depending on the political climate, and while there has always been at least some resistance to them, they are hugely influential. Commenting on the artistic climate in 1980s China, Geremie Barmé states that “external political coercion and the internal pressures of the Chinese deep structure meld to create a new self-censoring cultural figure, the state artist.” According to his
view, Chinese artists, while living in a period when the country was becoming more open, were faced with subtle pressures to conform to official state narratives so as to avoid “social ostracism.” (Barmé 1999: 386) As a result they were often complicit with official narratives, lest they risked sabotaging their careers and social positions. Barmé’s observation remains at least partly relevant today, particularly with regard to the film industry, because documentary filmmakers are now required to “define themselves in relation to a three-legged system, composed of the party apparatus, the marketized economy, and foreign media and art organizations that have built up a presence in China today.” (Berry 2006: 109) The complications inherent in such a system require a balancing act on the part of any documentary filmmaker and can obscure the filmmaker’s own viewpoint. Such ambiguities make it difficult to know “whether the new documentary participates in the maintenance of Chinese postsocialism or disturbs it.” (Berry 2007: 116)

Cultural production has, from the inception of the CCP, been recognized as an important tool for the education of the masses. In his speeches at Yan’an in 1942, Mao outlined what he felt should be the role of art and literature during what was a time of war and revolution. He stated that artists must recognize that “rich deposits of literature and art actually exist in popular life itself...[and] they are the sole and inexhaustible source of processed forms of literature.” The major role of the artist, in Mao’s view, was to “awaken and arouse the popular masses, urging them on to unity and struggle and to take part in transforming their own environment.” Thus, Chinese artists were expected to “go among the masses” and produce art to “help [them] push history forward.” (McDougall 1980: 69-70) While Mao’s talks at Yan’an helped to increase respect for popular forms of
art that had previously been disregarded, his views were rigid and were born of specific historical circumstances. Following the Communist victory and the establishment of the PRC, the talks at Yan’an were used to justify increasingly rigid censorship policies, making the lives of many writers and artists very difficult. They established rigid expectations that art should be “subordinate to politics” and that “the only targets that revolutionary writers and artists can take for exposure are aggressors, exploiters and oppressors, not the popular masses.” (McDougall 1980: 75, 80) If there were any shortcomings among the masses, these were the fault of such enemies of the people.

Expectations of artists, such as those articulated by Mao at Yan’an, drove policies that tended to produce black and white characterizations idealizing the model citizen or revolutionary and demonizing the counterrevolutionary so that neither seemed entirely human. The Monument to the People’s Heroes is a perfect example of such idealized art. It is “dedicated to deceased heroes [but] remain[s] impersonal and conceptual,” because it depicts only idealized faces in the historical reliefs. (Wu 2005: 34) Such narratives are intended to educate the masses and inspire them to transform themselves. (Andrews 1994: 150) When cultural production is made with such goals in mind, traumatic historical events cannot be recounted in an individualized, realistic manner that might make the viewer uncomfortable or critical of the leadership – they must instead be modified to fit official collective memory. Thus, the inscriptions and carvings on The Monument to the People’s Heroes “do not bear people’s living memories [because] the subject of commemoration is the founding of New China,” not individual citizens. (Wu 2005: 43) It can be generally said that, “state-sponsored memory…erases the complexity and contingency of history, displacing private memory with a heroic and mythic
narrative.” (Denton 2000: 203) Thus, trauma is generally ignored, depersonalized or glorified, as in the case of martyrs – models for the citizenry.

It is in this context that I will discuss four examples of official visual discourse: San-yuan-li, a Cultural Revolution era comic (Wilkinson 1973), the Sanyuanli Anti-British Invasion Museum, and two modern-day feature films, Tian’anmen and The Founding of a Republic (Jianguo daye).

Official visual discourse encompasses many spheres of Chinese life; I have chosen to broaden the discussion to include a comic book and a museum because official discourse is not limited to one visual medium. Examining such media is necessary because it functions as more than just entertainment, instilling and illustrating new values and cultural changes. (Pang 2007: 29) It is also important because visual media caters people with lower levels of literacy and thereby aims to reach the widest audience possible.

The San-yuan-li comic and museum are good typical examples of an official narrative that has been carried through from 1949 to the present day. Tian’anmen and The Founding of a Republic, on the other hand, are contemporary examples of official visual discourse. All of the examples discussed function to present specific government ideologies and characterizations, privileging the nation-state above the individual.

2.2 The People’s Comic Book and the Idealization of Trauma

The People’s Comic Book, a collection of translated Chinese comic strips, was published in 1973, during the later years of the Cultural Revolution. In the introduction, Gino Nebiolo describes his first encounter with Chinese comics, on an overnight train ride. He states that almost everyone on the train went without sleep in order to devour the
comics that were passed out along with their tea, indicating how popular comics were at that time. (Wilkinson 1973: vii) All of the comics included in this volume were originally published in Chinese between 1965 and 1967, a time not long after the disasters of the Great Leap Forward, and immediately before or during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. It was a time when Mao and the CCP were very interested in legitimizing their rule and their “claim to speak for and dictate people’s lives.” (Denton 2000: 203) Thus, the majority of the stories in this collection, particularly those written in 1966 and 1967, function to illustrate the critical role of the CCP in the lives of the masses and in the liberation of China from imperialism. A particularly interesting example of how official narratives make use of historical events to legitimize their current right to rule can be found in the opening comic, titled San-yuan-li.

Sanyuanli is the name of a village in Guangdong, in the South of China.² It was the site of a conflict between the Chinese and British in 1841. The actual circumstances of this conflict differ greatly depending on the source consulted; in PRC history, the conflict was seen as a significant popular victory over imperialism, whereas in English-language sources it is described as a minor incident. The name of the author and artist of San-yuan-li are not provided; presumably they were not credited in the original Chinese version. The comic was published in both Hong Kong and Mainland China, an interesting example of a pro-Communist publication in the British-run colony. It is the only comic in the collection published outside of the PRC. Not having access to the original Chinese language text, I am unable to determine the exact provenance of this comic. In his introduction, however, Nebiolo notes that approximately 400,00 copies were produced,

² Note: I will use Sanyuanli when referring to the place name, and San-yuan-li when referring to the comic itself.
and that copies were sold in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. (Wilkinson 1973: xi)

Thus, *San-yuan-li* is an interesting example of an attempt to construct a collective memory both in and outside of directly CCP-controlled regions of the Chinese Diaspora. Given that Hong Kong was at that time still under British rule, the story’s anti-British message would likely have been seen by its producers as important for the edification of Hong Kong Chinese people. It was also produced either during or just before the Hong Kong Leftist Riots of 1967, which were driven in part by pro-Communist Hong Kong people who looked to the Mainland and the Cultural Revolution for inspiration. (Chan 1996: 12-13)

The comic is in black and white and is drawn in a realistic style. It opens with a disturbing image (Figure 1) of two opium addicts, one with a baby on her back, looking desperate and ill. In the background a British man and another man, who appears to be a Manchu official, are busy overseeing the transport of crates full of opium. The caption to this image states that the British were “attempting to ruin our country and destroy our people.” (Wilkinson 1973: 2) Thus, from the very beginning of the story the message to the reader is that, even in 1841, China was a homogenous nation with homogenous people, albeit under a cruel and ignorant leadership. The comic continues to describe the events of the First Opium War in the standard official manner: the Chinese were victims of the British imperialists and traitorous Manchu officials. In the face of this treachery and in reaction to the “countless women…raped and children killed.” (See Figure 2) a group of peasants and workers in the village of Sanyuanli decides to fight back. They form a militia to attack the British “pirates,” posting warnings in town that if the British do not stop their savage behavior, the villagers will wipe them out. Because “the Chinese
people are always as good as their word,” the peasant militia attacks the next group of British soldiers who invade. (Wilkinson 1973: 6) Soon the militia has grown and even “the weavers, masons and other workers of Canton” have joined up (Figure 3). (Wilkinson 1973: 7) The British General Gough, unprepared for this show of gallantry, “was so scared he couldn’t even eat his breakfast,” (Figure 4) a detail impossible to know yet effective in painting the British as cowardly in spite of their savagery. The battle ends (Figure 5) with the deaths of 200 British soldiers at the hands of the militia, “spilling out brains…and splashing their blood in every direction.” (Wilkinson 1973: 8) In response to the Chinese peasant resistance, the British, who know “that the Manchu Qing Dynasty [is] corrupt and incapable,” appeal to a Manchu official who, in cahoots with the village’s inept landlords and literati, orders the peasants to disband. (Figure 6 and Figure 7; Wilkinson 1973: 11) The peasants have no choice but to give up the fight, yet they still post a notice defiantly stating that they do not need to rely on Manchu forces, and “if we don’t wipe out you pigs and dogs then we cannot be considered true Chinese!” (Figure 8; Wilkinson 1973: 12) Thus, the story ends as it begins, by reinforcing Chinese unity and nationalism in the face of imperialistic forces. In the final panel (Figure 9), the comic makes a direct connection between the peasants of Sanyuanli and the CCP, saying: “The Chinese kept their word. After the victory of San-yuan-li, the struggle of the Cantonese and of the people of all parts of China against the British continued for a hundred years.” (Wilkinson 1973: 12) The Sanyuanli incident occurred in 1841, and approximately one hundred years later, in 1949, the CCP took power. Thus, this comic connects the incident to a historical tradition of revolution that legitimizes the CCP right to rule.

I will begin my examination of this comic strip with a brief discussion of its version
of the Sanyuanli incident, which is depicted as a critical example of national resistance to imperialism, is different from portrayals in English-language historical sources. I will then discuss the manner in which the story depicts and utilizes trauma in service of official rhetoric.

In a search for English language sources on the Sanyuanli incident, I found that there is actually very little available, other than a sentence or two in general histories of China. In every source I located, the incident is described as something relatively small, in which one man was killed and up to fifteen others were injured. Roberts and Wakeman use the word “skirmish” to describe what happened, while Spence describes it as a confrontation. (Roberts 1999: 167; Spence 1990: 169; Wakeman 1966: 19) Roberts states that it was actually the local gentry leaders who recruited the militia; this is in stark contrast to the comic (see Figure 3), which indicates it was an organic uprising driven by ‘the masses’ and that the local gentry were complicit with the British. (Roberts 1999: 167) Spence states that the Canton militia was composed of “complicated mixtures of gentry leaders, local thugs, bona fide peasant volunteers…martial-arts organizations, and groups of men from common trades.” (Spence 1990: 169) The comic portrays the uprising as peasant-led. In official narratives from the 1960s it would have been impossible for such resistance to be led by the gentry, because that would contradict Maoist class doctrine, and so the characters in the story are shown to be workers or peasants. As all of the English-language sources acknowledge, the incident became an important symbol of China’s ability to resist foreign aggression. The comic’s version of events fits perfectly with the CCP’s desire to align itself with the masses. Although the CCP was not in existence in 1841, the time of the uprising, the comic’s implicit message
is that the Sanyuanli incident failed because the peasants lacked a supportive leadership and were betrayed by the local gentry who cut the incident short (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). The implication is that, unlike the landlords and literati who failed the Sanyuanli resisters, the CCP is the only possible leader for the liberation of China and its people.

Another important aspect of the comic is the sharp contrast between the portrayals of the Chinese peasants and the British. The British are evil, greedy, bourgeois imperialists, weighed down by their impractical heavy leather boots (Figure 10). The barefoot Chinese peasants, whose movements are agile and unimpeded, easily kill the soldiers with hoes. (Wilkinson 1973: 9) The peasants fight the British and resist imperialism on behalf of the nation of China. By making the Sanyuanli incident a model of nationalistic, patriotic resistance, rather than a localized, complicated historical moment, the comic places the story squarely within the context of official narratives that promote the image of a unified, homogenous nation of people who share a common cause.

The traumatic lead-up to the Sanyuanli resistance, including the rape and murder of the citizens of Canton, is both emphasized and glossed over by the comic’s author(s). The single panel that describes Chinese suffering at the hands of the British shows, in the foreground, a house aflame, and in the background British soldiers variously looting and dragging a woman with a child at her feet (see Figure 2). The woman’s back is to the reader, preventing us from seeing her face, making her a general symbol for the trauma inflicted upon China and its people, rather than a specific person. Thus, although the image is disturbing, it is also so depersonalized as to render it effective only as a metaphor for national humiliation.
In contrast to the brief treatment of Chinese suffering, the violence inflicted upon the British soldiers is quite detailed, spanning several panels, and even, in one instance, naming the British soldier involved (See Figure 11 for examples). The end result of all this violence is not trauma, but glory. The narrative demonstrates the Chinese national character in the face of injustice, and contrasts it with the cowardly British character. It also justifies the use of violence in certain contexts. Thus, as exemplified here, traumatic events in Chinese history are often utilized in a manner that constructs a “revolutionary past that [is] clear and meaningful and [that keeps] alive the revolutionary spirit in the present.” (Denton 2000: 205) History is used “as a morality play in which there is a heroic victory of forces of good and light over evil and darkness.” (Denton 2000: 205) History built on such a framework becomes an ahistorical activity that functions only “to meet the challenge of new political and cultural circumstances,” rather than to portray the complexities and ambiguities of historical ‘truth.’ (Wang 1999: 125) Such an approach to traumatic historical events also minimizes individual pain and loss because it often turns the events into official memories that are “spectacular and triumphant, imposed – either by a national authority or by an established interest, but always from above.” (Nora 1989: 23)

2.3 The Sanyuanli Narrative in the Present Day

As an example of how consistent certain official historical narratives have remained, it is interesting see that the Sanyuanli incident has invariably been portrayed as a triumphant part of the PRC’s official “Revolutionary Past.” (Denton 2000: 203) It has been given its own commemorative museum, the Sanyuanli Anti-British Invasion Museum (Sanyuanli kang Ying jinian guan). The online English description of the
museum mentions that it possesses historical artifacts, but also that it contains “a vivid
drawing that shows the scene of the rally of local peasants…before going into war with
British troops.” (Guangzhou 2006) This trend of visually recreating historical events in
the form of paintings that are then displayed in museums alongside actual artifacts has
been noted by Denton. (Denton 2000: 209) Thus, visuality in general continues to be used
in powerful ways to communicate official narratives to the viewer in China today. The
visual media used run the gamut from comic books to museums to websites.

The *Sanyuanli Anti-British Invasion Museum* website also states that in 1961
Sanyuanli, “topped the list of the first group of national-level protected cultural heritage
sites published by the State Council.” (Guangzhou 2006) Thus, the decision to
commemorate this particular historical event was made at the state level and was most
likely related to its symbolic importance and meaning for the political goals of the CCP at
that time. The *Sanyuanli Anti-British Invasion Museum* is, therefore, an interesting
example of a museum being used as a pedagogical tool by the state. It is also an example
of the state taking a traumatic event, the violent deaths of Chinese citizens in the conflict,
and fitting it into the discourse of martyrdom, a common trope in official narratives. The
near-worship of revolutionary ‘martyrs’ is “central to PRC culture and its construction of
the revolutionary past.” (Denton 2000: 224) In official narratives, people who died for the
cause of the CCP are often elevated to a mythic level – Lei Feng, a soldier in the People’s
Liberation Army who died young but who left diary entries expressing, among other
things, his desire to be a ‘screw’ in the revolution, is a good example of this sort of
idealization. (Rosen 1993: 319) Martyr narratives function didactically, serving as models
of self-sacrifice in service of the state. The humanity of these martyrs and their traumatic
deaths are therefore subsumed within the larger project of official deification; trauma and historical truth yield to melodramatic glorification of self-sacrifice.

2.4 Visualizing the Nation in Contemporary Chinese Film

More current examples of official visual narratives can be found in the 2009 films The Founding of a Republic (Jianguo daye) and Tian’anmen, both of which are so-called main melody (zhuxuanlu) films. The term zhuxuanlu can also be translated as ‘propaganda’ or ‘leitmotif.’ Such films are made to communicate government ideologies; that is to say, to educate viewers. Jianguo Daye and Tian’anmen were produced by the state-owned China Film Group (CFG), to be released alongside celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 2009. Han Sanping, the Chairman of CFG, produced both movies.

Tian’anmen, directed by Ye Daying, is a fictionalized account of the preparations for the very first National Day on October 1st, 1949; it is dedicated to the People’s Republic of China on the occasion of its 60th anniversary (Figure 12). The film is generally well-made, with the exception of one sequence in which Mao’s face, taken from archival newsreel footage, is awkwardly digitally pasted onto an actor, allowing the main character to share a scene with the Chairman. To briefly summarize, the film follows Tian Zhenying, leader of the Stage Design Team of Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Military Region, who is given 28 days to restore and decorate the great gate in Tiananmen Square in time for the declaration of New China on October 1st. Mao will be making his celebratory speech atop the gate and the task is therefore of the utmost importance. Supporting characters notably include an aged lantern-maker who once served the emperor, and a noble Japanese artist who had to leave his family and country
behind when he opposed the war. Once in China, he joined the anti-Japanese resistance. The story is predictable, although entertaining, with minimal drama and some comic relief. One subplot involves a chubby Chinese team member who becomes infatuated with a beautiful accordion-playing young woman who leads children in patriotic songs. By the end of the film, however, it is Tian Zhenying, the team leader, who marries the woman.

As Tian Zhenying struggles to lead his team and to prove himself to his superiors he encounters several set-backs, most notably that the lanterns needed to decorate the gate are apparently impossibly large and perhaps impossible to produce. With the deadline looming, Tian tracks down an elderly man who once made lanterns for the emperor. In spite of the old man’s continuing faith in feudal rites and beliefs Tian apprentices with him in order to learn how to make the required massive lanterns. The entire troop works together, using special bamboo donated by the old man himself, to complete the task. Thus, when the 28 days are up, the team has successfully restored and decorated the gate. As a reward, Tian is invited to stay atop the gate in order to watch Mao give his speech. He is moved and amazed, and although he does not manage to shake Mao’s hand, he does get to see him up close. His troop members in the square below are ecstatic with joy. The elder lantern maker, having been convinced of Mao’s worthiness, is also shown bowing with deep respect.

*Tian’anmen* is a generally entertaining film, particularly in terms of its recreation of Tian’anmen square circa 1949, but the story is lacking in tension and is simplistic. It idealizes both Mao and the establishment of the PRC. Tian Zhenying, while not so one-dimensional as to seem inhuman, is still not developed beyond his patriotism. He is
desperate to achieve his assigned task for the glory of Mao and New China, but we learn very little about him or his troop members beyond the surface. The film ends with a short scene of the troop leader as an elderly man, followed by a montage of photographs of Tian’anmen over the years. The implication that everything up to the present day has been happy and good rings false, particularly to viewers aware of the events of June 4th, 1989. While the ideologies promoted vary depending on the time period, Tian’anmen continues the tendency of official narratives to frame history primarily with reference to the nation-state, rather than to the individual. It also re-emphasizes the message that was also clear in the San-yuan-li comic previously discussed: the CCP has been and continues to be a legitimate and beneficial leader of China and of the Chinese people.

Jianguo Daye, unlike Tian’anmen, represents a rethinking of so-called 'main melody' films. Traditionally such films were very black and white, with noble heroes, martyrs, and villains. Jianguo Daye, however, is a far more sophisticated kind of zhuxuanlu film. It is a marketable, Hollywood-style blockbuster filled with big name stars, but the history and ideology it sells the audience is government-approved. (See Figure 13 for two versions of promotional posters for the film.)

Han Sanping, the producer and co-director (along with Huang Jianxin), has stated in interviews that he aims to make Hollywood-style films that appeal to Chinese people. (Liu 2009) The decision to recruit upwards of 150 Chinese stars to participate in brief cameos was a brilliant marketing move, drawing on China's established star system and attracting audience members who might normally be put off by a main melody film. The

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3 For another perspective on Jianguo Daye, see Xiaobing Tang’s 2009 article in which he calls for a more sophisticated reading of the film, and criticizes western film critics who dismiss the film as nothing more than propaganda. (Tang 2009)
stars reportedly all participated for free, an indication (in my perhaps cynical view) that they are aware of the career benefits of working within the system.

*Jianguo Daye* begins in 1945, soon after Japan’s surrender in World World II, as Mao Zedong travels to Chongqing for a meeting with Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-Shek). They attempt to negotiate the peaceful construction of a new China, finally signing the Double-Tenth Agreement. Eventually this agreement breaks down and the country becomes embroiled in a civil war between the CCP and the KMT. The CCP is shown consistently working towards a New China, through numerous negotiations with other political groups, the China Democratic League in particular. The KMT, on the other hand, is constantly struggling to contain its own internal politics and corruption. Eventually, Jiang Jieshi and the KMT are forced to flee to Taiwan, while the CCP succeeds in occupying Beijing, where Mao proclaims the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

As a piece of storytelling, the film is not, in my view, successful. It is obviously intended for a Chinese audience because it requires viewers to be quite familiar with the politics of the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. The vast majority of the film involves scenes of political meetings and talking heads. While the civil war in China was at times very traumatic and violent, the film largely avoids depicting any fighting between Chinese people; the war is always portrayed from a visual distance, using aerial shots of soldiers running towards one another on digitized battlefields, with no blood in sight. The film instead focuses more on the high level maneuvering that went on between the KMT and the CCP. By omitting the violence that occurred between the two sides (with the exception of a KMT-backed assassination), the audience can consume
the film as uncomplicated entertainment, rather than as a complex historical period with great impact on the common citizen.

The characterizations of Jiang Jieshi and his son, Jiang Jingguo are more nuanced than one might expect. Jingguo, in particular, is portrayed as a noble man who is attempting to overcome difficult political circumstances. Unlike traditional portrayals of the KMT and Jiang Jieshi as evil villains, the film instead shows the two men as simply misguided patriots stymied by corruption in their party. Such a portrayal may be related to the CCP's desire to 'bring Taiwan back into the fold,' in which case it would be to their advantage to present a more sympathetic image of Jiang Jieshi.

In spite of the more complex characterizations of the Jiangs, the cinematography, costume design and settings all serve to emphasize that they were still on the wrong side. The KMT are always lit in a bluish, cold light. They are shown in rigid uniforms and in opulent surroundings - far from the average Chinese person. In contrast, Mao and his men are always lit with a warm yellow light. They live among the people, staying in rural homes and eating like the locals. Their uniforms are worn and relaxed in appearance and their meetings are jovial, filled with friendly banter, smoking and drinking. The film documents some of the excesses of the KMT, including assassinations and corruption, but makes no mention of the CCP’s own violence during the civil war.

While the film portrays Mao as a kind of lovable uncle, he comes across as a character curiously bereft of any inner complexity or depth. He never talks about the political ideology that was such a large part of his life. He and Zhou Enlai frolic with children in fields (although Mao left many of his own children behind to pursue his political goals). He is shown as always willing to compromise and work with people with
differing views, the China Democratic League in particular. In one scene he even laments that he can't buy cigarettes, stating that there is still a need to work with capitalists (echoing 2009 Communist Party policies, perhaps?). Given his politics, it seems unlikely he would have said this. There is no mention of class struggle or of the proletariat. The film creates a Mao who is benign enough to be a figurehead for whatever policies the current government is trying to promote, but who is far from historically accurate.

_Jianguo Daye_ represents a newer, more sophisticated style of state-funded filmmaking that still functions to communicate official ideologies and politics. The prominent role of the state in funding and promoting such films demonstrates its continued centrality to history- and myth-making in China today. _San-yuan-li, Jianguo Daye, Tian’anmen_ all focus on the nation, not the individual, as the prime entity with which to identify. The message in such official narratives has consistently been that the CCP is best for China and its people. They “effect uplifting emotion and triumphant sentiment,” but such visions suppress complexity, multiple viewpoints and historical sorrow. (Wang 1999: 127) The audience is not encouraged to question or confront historical experience. Most if not all modern states play a role in history-telling, but their effectiveness and reach varies from place to place. In China, the state and the state-owned China Film Group have the power to fund, distribute and promote films of their choosing. Such power is denied to independent filmmakers who, in order to gain access to large domestic audiences, may eventually find it more convenient and lucrative to abandon riskier projects in order to work within the confines of the state-approved system.

In spite of the above restrictions, some filmmakers have begun to forge new paths and perspectives on some of the most traumatic events in recent Chinese history,
including the Great Leap Forward, the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. Because these events were so devastating and so complex, and because they affected huge segments of the Chinese population, they remain politically sensitive and largely off-limits to historians within the PRC. In order to provide context for my discussion of such films in Chapter 4, I will use Chapter 3 to discuss in greater detail the current state of independent filmmaking in China, with a particular emphasis on where independent films are screened and on who is seeing them.
3 INDEPENDENT FILM IN CHINA

3.1 Overview of Film in China

Film technology has been present in China since 1895. It reached a golden age in the 1930s, during which the film industry in Shanghai was vibrant and diverse, producing films that ran the gamut from very light popular culture to movies with much heavier, political goals. As time went on, with China experiencing increasing instability related first to the Second World War and the Japanese occupation, and then to the civil war that followed, film began to play an important role in promoting specific ideas about the Chinese nation and its people. Leftist filmmakers saw film as part of a larger project of “rescuing the nation from both external and internal threats.” (Voci 2006) Such directors viewed film, an accessible visual form, as the perfect medium for educating the people. While many of these films, such as Wu Yonggang’s 1934 film, The Goddess (Shennu), are now heralded as classics of that time period, it is important to remember that they were only one facet of a diverse film industry that flourished at the time. Other crowd-pleasing films that were less politically motivated and didactic, and large numbers of foreign films, particularly American ones, were also part of the Chinese film industry in this post WW2 period. (Leyda 1972: 61-62) Film rapidly became part of the political and popular culture, constructing varying versions of China.

With the victory of the Communist Party in 1949, however, the film industry began to change. Films were made mainly to commemorate political events, both historical and contemporary, and “many…cinema pieces were either blacklisted for their incorrect ideology or conversely made into exemplars of revolutionary tenets.” (Braester 2007: 107) Large numbers of people in the industry eventually fled to Hong Kong, ultimately
helping to establish it as a new capital of Chinese filmmaking. (Leyda 1972: 271-272) Mao’s views on literature and art as described at Yan’an in 1942 were very influential in Mainland China, and socialist realism and melodrama emerged as the major approaches to storytelling. Since the late 1930s short films had been used to educate both CCP army soldiers and the general population; because the audiences “were largely illiterate or semi-literate, the direct audio-visual medium of film was considered an essential political and educational tool.” (Lin 2005) The purpose of such films was to present a specific point of view, therefore, the standard narrative form tended to be highly scripted and structured.

Until the late 1980s, the predominant style of documentary film in China was the special report (zhuanti pian), a form that was produced for broadcast on television. (Yi 2006: 42) Such official documentaries had been produced since the 1950s, motivated in part by “Lenin’s view that film is the most powerful tool for mass education and that documentary film is a forceful form of visualized political argument.” (Chu 2004) Zhuanti pian were structured as “pre-scripted, illustrated” lectures with voice-of-god narration that interpreted events for the viewer, so that “there could be no question as to the meaning or significance of the events happening onscreen.” (Berry 2007: 117; Lin 2005)

As China began to open up in the 1980s, a new group of feature filmmakers emerged. Commonly termed the Fifth Generation, this group included people such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang. These filmmakers were all graduates of the Beijing Film Academy and they “set out to tell and reinterpret China’s recent history (especially the rise and fall of communist idealism).” (Voci 2006) They
made their films within the state system, sometimes pushing boundaries and encountering trouble with the authorities; they encountered some of their greatest early successes and exposure outside of China.

By the early 1990s a new group of filmmakers with different styles than the Fifth Generation filmmakers had begun to emerge. Most of them made feature films, but some made documentaries. They have been labeled the Sixth Generation, although this label may not be particularly useful or accurate given that most of the new filmmakers come from diverse backgrounds and do not necessarily have similar goals. (Voci 2006) Among this new group of filmmakers were those who began making documentaries that were distinct from the officially produced zhuanti pian. These newer documentaries focused on contemporary subjects whose voices were not represented in the official films. Wu Wenguang’s 1990 *Bumming in Beijing* (*Liulang Beijing*) is generally considered to be the first example of this shift. (Berry 2007: 117) Such new films were made largely outside of the state-owned system, and were much less didactic than standard zhuanti pian productions. Initially many of the filmmakers focused on educated, urban elites as subjects. As the years passed, however, their subject matter became increasingly diverse, paying “particular attention to marginalized social sectors, such as…itinerant art workers, migrant workers (*mingong*), laid off urban workers, prostitutes and gays/lesbians.” (Wang 2005: 19) Some scholars, such as Lu Xinyu (2007), have labeled these films as a “new documentary movement” (*xin jilu yundong*), while others label it simply as an example of ‘alternative cultural production’ that does not constitute a movement because of “the small number of its participants, the unavailability of its representative works to the public and its little impact on domestic audiences.” (Zhang 2004: 120) I am inclined
to agree with Zhang since many of the filmmakers have indicated that they work alone, not as part of a larger group with unified goals.

While many of the new films are labeled independent, either by the filmmakers themselves or by their audiences, it is difficult to define exactly what form this independence takes. Models of independence from the Soviet Union or from the United States are inadequate to describe the Chinese model. In the US model independence signifies that a filmmaker is separate from corporate entities that form the dominant system, namely Hollywood. The Soviet Model was based on a dissent culture in opposition to the state. In China, many independent filmmakers work within state institutions and corporations, or they have foreign support. Such connections often help sustain and fund their outside creative projects. Thus, any film projects “initiated and controlled by the filmmaker…and not made within “the system” (tizhi)” are considered to be independent. However, the fact that many artists work both within and without the system makes defining what is meant by ‘independence’ a sometimes difficult task. (Berry 2006)

Within the world of independent filmmaking in China, the production of documentary films (as opposed to fictional features) allows for some specific advantages: (1) because such productions are difficult to preplan, it is not usually possible for a script to be submitted for official approval prior to the commencement of filming; and (2) documentary films “by giving voice to ordinary people [tap] into the longstanding practice of seeking out a public space for airing otherwise unresolved grievances.” (Berry 2007: 126) Indeed, if a documentary filmmaker makes an independent work “but does not attempt to release it in the commercial movie theatres or broadcast it on television,
then it is not subject to any censorship mechanism.” If filmmakers choose to avoid censorship in this manner they must accept that their films will have “limited audiences and limited production resources.” (Berry 2006: 115-116) Such a choice requires that filmmakers limit the spread of their work in China to hand-to-hand distribution, with only a few opportunities for local art gallery or small film festival screenings; this method does provide access to a limited, usually urban audience, but effectively eliminates any potential for profit or domestic mainstream recognition. In a recent interview, when asked about the current state of film production in China, Jia Zhangke stated:

I think the Chinese film industry is still at an early stage, because so far Chinese films really have had to rely on the state-owned studio system. Particularly in terms of film creation and production, this is still primarily controlled by a few large production companies, like the China Film Group or Shanghai Film Group—they’re all state-owned enterprises. There are lots of private film investors, but their productions still include the state-run organizations at some point down the line, so from this perspective we can say that the industry really isn’t that prosperous, free or independent. Currently, the film industry and the old system aren’t that far apart. (“Jing Daily” 2010a)

Jia’s statement illuminates the limitations faced by those artists who choose to create independent films.

In spite of production and distribution related complications and difficulties, there is a small but growing body of work that seeks to document narratives outside the mainstream, and even to challenge official narratives. Such films present voices that are not heard in more official, mainstream films.


3.2 *Huanying Daoban – Independence, Audience and Distribution*

Although briefly touched upon in the previous section (3.1), the question of who gets to see the films of independent filmmakers such as Hu Jie and Wang Bing is one that cannot be easily answered. Within Mainland China, such films are not screened in official venues, nor can their producers rely upon official distribution channels via television or movie theatres. This does not mean that no one sees the films – in Beijing and other major cities, screenings are held in venues such as art galleries and university campuses, as well as in some clubs and cafes - but it certainly limits their access to potential audiences. It also limits potential profit for the filmmakers themselves. The film festivals I attended in Beijing were all free events, and my understanding is that this is done to avoid trouble with the authorities by making the events seem less formal and less official. ("Di wu jie" 2007: 1, 3) However, Fanhall Films, a support organization and sponsor of independent film festivals based in Songzhuang Beijing, does sell authorized DVDs of unofficial films. I do not know how money made from such DVDs is divided between the artist and Fanhall Films. Among film aficionados, there is brisk unofficial distribution of the most popular independent films – in a conversation with Hu Jie, he told me to feel free to make copies of any of his films, saying “Huanying daoban,” an attitude that seems to be common among the relatively small filmmaking community. (Hu 2009) By being so relaxed about the distribution of his films, Hu Jie benefits in at least two ways: (1) He is able to get feedback and constructive criticism from the friends who see his earlier edits, something that has been very important to shaping his ideas and narratives (Pan 2008: 75-76); (2) He avoids official censorship yet still manages to have an audience.
Very little research has been done to better understand how films like Hu and Wang’s are produced and distributed in China. There are three main ways in which such films reach domestic Chinese audiences: first, through online distribution or hand-to-hand distribution of unofficial VCDs or DVDs of the films; second, at “unofficial film festivals on college campuses or special exhibits at art galleries” (Zhang 2006: 36); third, at small, unofficial film clubs in major urban centers such as Beijing or Shanghai. (Nakajima 2006) I will briefly discuss each distribution channel.

The Internet is a powerful tool for educated, urban dwellers for whom “cyber filters are only a relatively small obstacle.” (Voci 2006) If these Internet users are determined to see such films, then they need only use proxy servers to do so. It appears that this is a common method for viewers to watch independent films, not to mention mainstream films, a fact noted in a recent interview with Jia Zhangke. (“Jing Daily” 2010a) Hu Jie has stated that one scholar estimated that his film In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao “had been downloaded from the Internet more than 800,000 times.” (Hu 2008: 69) Many of those who have seen his films have told him that they also burned copies and passed the film on to their friends. (Hu 2008: 69) Thus, it is clear that hand-to-hand distribution is a major distribution channel for independent documentaries and could perhaps be seen as the return of manuscript culture, with DVDs taking the place of paper. In speaking with Hu Jie, I learned that he often burns early versions of his films to DVD and then passes them on to friends. He stated that, particularly early on, he did this to ensure that even if he got into trouble with the authorities, his work up to that point would already be in the public domain. (Hu 2009) This explains why I encountered at least two versions of each of the documentaries discussed later in this thesis.
The second major venue for documentaries is unofficial film festivals. These screenings often take place on university campuses or in art galleries and although they are unofficial, they do not occur in secret; the government is aware of them. If certain films on festival programmes make local or national authorities uncomfortable, the festival can be reprimanded or cancelled entirely. For example, in September 2001, an independent film festival put on by the Beijing Film Academy and sponsored by the *Southern Weekend* newspaper was halted midway through and the organizers were required to write self-criticisms. (Lin 2005) Similarly, due to the inclusion of *Though I am Gone* in the YunFest 2007 program, the entire festival was cancelled. (Hu 2008: 73)

Thus, while such venues do attempt to push the envelope in terms of what films they screen, if they push too far they are prevented from running. Such festivals may therefore be forced to self-censor when choosing which films to screen. Thus, while the festivals are technically ‘unofficial,’ they are still vulnerable to shifts in political winds. Tolerance of such film festivals is a marker of increasing openness in China but such openness is fickle and ill-defined. It often requires careful negotiation with local officials on the part of organizers. ("Di wu jie" 2007: 2, 5) Similar problems affect the final major unofficial venue, the film club.

The third major venue for independent films is through small film clubs in urban areas. Seio Nakajima’s study of film clubs in Beijing is one of the first to provide ethnographic evidence of how independent films are viewed by Chinese citizens, as well as the difficulties encountered by clubs that attempt to screen films from a political perspective. (Nakajima 2006) While each of the four film clubs studied screened a great diversity of films, one became too political and was eventually shut down due to “the
power of the film bureaucracy as well as numerous administrative divisions of public security.” Another of the clubs studied attempted to function independent of the market with the goal of “art for art’s sake,” but by the end of the study it was struggling to continue. (Nakajima 2006: 185) While I have not touched on market issues in this thesis, Nakajima’s study offers interesting insight into how they affect contemporary Chinese film. Even if independent films were given full access to official distribution channels, they might still be excluded. In order to stay in business, theatre and club owners have to take market forces into account and may choose to screen more marketable films instead of more artistic, independent works.

The abovementioned unofficial forms of distribution are predominantly found among educated people living in privileged, urban areas. While I have no evidence to support the contention, I suspect that knowledge of such independent films is limited outside of these circles. It is easy to overestimate the impact of new technologies such as the Internet, and to forget that only a small percentage of the population currently has access to it. This is due to “the big rural-urban divide and, more broadly, the deeply unequal distribution of China’s new wealth.” (Voci 2006) Thus, although the three main channels of unofficial distribution discussed above have helped documentary filmmakers such as Hu Jie and Wang Bing to reach Chinese audiences, the denial of access to official distribution channels necessarily limits exposure to their films. Potential for profit is therefore also limited.

Another issue related to limited access to official channels of distribution is that many of these films have not been properly preserved and archived. The China Film Archive is responsible for preserving officially produced Chinese films. (Yu 2003) It is
not, however, tasked with preserving any independent films. Thus, although certain Chinese films are archived in private collections or by foreign film festivals, it is certain that many others “live and die among the people” and are not properly recorded or preserved. (Lin 2005) This situation has recently begun to be addressed by the Chinese Independent Film Archive (CIFA), a non-profit organization founded in 2008 with the goal of collecting and promoting independent Chinese film. It is located in Beijing’s 798 Art District in the Iberia Center for Contemporary Art. In April 2009 the CIFA mounted an exhibit called “What Has Been Happening Here,” which featured film screenings, as well as profiles of six organizations that have played major roles in the recent development of independent Chinese film. (“Zheli shi shenme?” 2009) Li Xianting’s Film Fund, in particular, has become a significant source of funds for filmmakers. Li Xianting is an art critic credited with supporting and promoting many avant-garde artists in the late 80s and the 90s. He has now turned his sights on the independent film industry, setting up a non-profit fund to support small-scale documentary projects. (“Di wu jie” 2007: 2, 4-5) Indeed, Hu Jie’s newest film, *National East Wind Farm* (*Guoying dongfeng nongchang*), which is not within the scope of this thesis, received funding from Li Xianting’s fund. I hope that organizations such as Li Xianting’s Film Fund will have a positive effect on the production of independent film in China, although Li himself seems pessimistic. (“Di wu jie” 2007: 2, 5)

In spite of the recent growth of such exhibitions and screenings in Mainland China, many filmmakers also market their films abroad, mainly at film festivals. The viewers at these festivals form the “majority of theater audiences for Chinese independent works [and] are mostly ‘white, Western, and middle-class.’” (Zhang 2006: 35) This is not
to say that there is no Asian audience for film festivals; there are many who attend film festivals such as the Hong Kong International Film Festival or the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (which has played a large role in premiering the works of many Chinese documentarians.) Still, it is likely that many of the audience members “are in search of audacious political ideas, distinctive artistic visions and authentic (i.e., exotic) national cultures.” (Zhang 2006: 32) Such audience demands can lead to sensationalism in film programmes that promote independent Chinese films as “banned” or “subversive.” While some Chinese filmmakers may specifically aim to make such an impact in order to raise their profile and thus force “the state to pay attention to them and later provide them with opportunities to make expensive aboveground movies,” other filmmakers are concerned about the potential for misinterpretation of their films by foreign audiences. (Pickowicz 2006: 10) Hu Jie told me that his films are intended for Chinese audiences, and that he refuses to accept foreign funding for fear that accepting it might affect the credibility of his documentaries. (Hu 2009) Nonetheless, he is aware that his films attract foreign interest. He has expressed concern that non-Chinese audience members might misinterpret the significance of his films and “think poorly of us Chinese.” (Rui 2005) Wang Bing has also encountered problems with foreign interpretations of his films. He has dismissed the view that He Fengming is a political statement, but this interpretation seems to be common in English reviews of the film. Interestingly, however, misinterpretation also appears to be a problem among Chinese audiences. Hu Jie has lamented some of the reactions he has received from Chinese audiences who have accused him of fabricating history or of looking for “prizes overseas.” (Hu 2008: 72) At a screening of a rough cut of Hu Jie’s newest film, National
East Wind Farm, in November 2008, I witnessed first hand some of the negative reactions people have to documentaries that examine difficult historical/political periods. National East Wind Farm is a series of interviews with former rightists who were interned in a labour camp in Yunnan beginning in the late 1950s. After the film was screened, a young man got up to comment (I later learned he was called Xiao Zhao and was an independent poet (ziyou shiren)). I will quote the man’s on-the-spot poem verbatim:

“With regard to political topics / My attitude is generally / It’s not worth your while / It’s nothing new / It’s uninteresting / There’s nothing challenging about it / What’s more, there’s always / one group, acting like whiny women, denouncing such things in unison / The most laughable being the director who / upon discovering the bathroom stinks / thinks he’s found some big news. [对于政治题材 我一贯的态度是 不屑一顾 没有新意 没有趣味 没有难度 而且 总是有 一个团的怨妇齐声控诉 最可笑的是导演 发现厕所是臭的 就以为掌握了重大消息]” (“Jiu Hu Jie” 2008)

This comment angered many in the audience, particularly older members of the crowd, many of whom said Xiao Zhao’s attitude was typical of the indifferent post-80s or post-90s generations who had never known suffering. Other audience members got up and spoke for or against Xiao Zhao’s comments; many younger people attempted to distance their views from Xiao Zhao’s. The discussion became quite heated at times and was an extremely interesting look into intergenerational tensions present in contemporary China. While Xiao Zhao’s point of view may be unusually harsh, it did demonstrate the
potential for a “gap between the artist’s vision and its acceptability by the domestic audience.” (Zhang 2006: 38) ⁴

At present, it is still safe to say that many independent Chinese films are seen largely by non-\textit{Mainland Chinese} people⁵ and, as a result, are subject mainly to the interpretations or misinterpretations of these audiences. While state control of the media in China has been gradually becoming less stringent, the films examined in this paper are still denied official access to their target audiences.

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⁴ The issue of differing reception of independent film within and without China is addressed in by Michael Berry (2009) in his work about Jia Zhangke’s ‘Hometown Trilogy.’
⁵ Chinese people in the diaspora, such as Hong Kong, have access to the films, but it is difficult to know how many are seeing them.
4 UNOFFICIAL VISUAL DISCOURSE

4.1 Speaking Outside the Official

Official CCP narratives predominate in no small part because of official silencing of unofficial media, as has already been discussed in Chapter 3. This silencing has been imposed upon artists but, as Barmé notes, throughout the 1990s, when China was ‘opening up,’ “the underground – nonofficial musicians, artists, filmmakers, writers, and thinkers – went more public…whereas those who really threatened the status quo – labour activists and outspoken individuals of conscience – were harassed and imprisoned by the authorities.” (Barmé 1999: 181) This situation seems to continue to be the case, as evidenced by the recent imprisonment of the activist Hu Jia who, interestingly, made a short documentary about his family’s life under house arrest.\(^6\) Thus, although there may be an increasing openness to certain artists and topics, it seems that those artists who attempt to tackle sensitive historical issues, particularly non-fiction narratives such as documentaries, risk being seen as activists, which guarantees that their work will never be shown in official venues in China. The lack of distribution of their work means that few people have the opportunity to see it, much less to think critically about China’s modern history, and thus the impact of the artist’s message is inevitably lessened.

Thus, while I do not wish to imply that state-approved narratives are all homogenous and inalterable, new approaches are often “the product of changing state policies towards the arts, and…therefore limited in scope.” (Denton 2000: 210)

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\(^6\) A summary page of articles about Hu Jia written by the New York Times describes the recent events. ("Times Topics" n.d). The first section of Hu Jia’s four-part documentary entitled Prisoners in Freedom City can be found on Youtube:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2zvJltBCN8
dominance of strictly official versions of history over alternative versions, I feel that it is still reasonable to discuss the issue in a manner that sustains the contrast between official and unofficial narratives. This contrast is still maintained by the state, which has the power to fund and approve films for distribution. The interests of the state do not always coincide with the interests of individual artists, whose efforts are then marginalized. Nonetheless, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that the market is an increasingly large factor in the contemporary Chinese film industry, complicating the binary of ‘official’ and ‘unofficial.’

The approaches taken by those producing unofficial visual narratives of modern history and trauma are significantly different from official approaches. In official discourse traumatic time periods and events are generally addressed in a redemptive manner: mistakes were made by specific, misguided officials, but the Party, as it will always do, has learned and continues to better serve the people. (Wang 1999: 132) This approach to recounting trauma conceals the fact that the traumatized are still present, carrying, “an impossible history within them…the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.” (Caruth 1995: 4-5) It also serves the political aims of the CCP, cultivating “an unquestioned trust in the ‘justice’ of history.” (Wang 1999, 131) Trauma thus becomes something consigned entirely to the past, a temporary anomaly on the path to what will always, in the end, be a harmonious system under the rule of the CCP.

Official visual discourse tends to be very authoritative in its voice – its version of events

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7 One example is ‘scar literature’ (shanghen wenxue) from the late 1970s. Although this literature recounted traumatic experiences, and could be quite critical of Chinese society under socialism, the stories often ended with the author expressing “his or her confidence in the new regime: now that the four villains [note: the Gang of Four] had been vanquished, the whole nation could look forward to a “bright future” under the new party leadership.” (Siu and Stern 1985, xxxix)
is portrayed as the truth, with no gaps for more complex analysis. The San-yuan-li comic is a good example of an unquestioning narrative that aims mainly to educate the reader. There are no gaps in the story and there is no real room for other interpretations. In sharp contrast to this method of recounting trauma, unofficial counternarratives often highlight the gaps in historical narratives, pushing the viewer to see complexity and to question official discourse. Such counternarratives often portray trauma as something experienced on an individual level, and not always redemptively. The focus is frequently on the small-scale but strong impact of state-driven traumas. Complex high-level political maneuvering by an elite few can have a massive impact on those for whom the political details are often distant and confusing. In many cases there is no redemption, and negative experiences affect people long after the initial trauma is over. Counternarratives that privilege the individual over the collective emphasize the fact that “experience, at its traumatic core, takes the form of individual memory.” (Wang 1999: 141)

In this chapter, which will form the core of my study, I focus on the works of two particularly interesting and important contemporary filmmakers, Hu Jie and Wang Bing. To the best of my knowledge, while many contemporary Chinese filmmakers are rushing to capture stories of how China is currently changing (stories which are valuable and fascinating), Hu and Wang are among a small minority of artists capturing individual stories of sensitive and traumatic historical periods such as the Great Leap Forward, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and the Cultural Revolution through interviews with elderly people. Both filmmakers have stated they were motivated by a desire for Chinese people to learn more about recent history but, as I will discuss, their approaches to recording this history are completely different. Hu has already made a number of films in which he
interviews elderly people and he has stated that he is rushing to document as many stories as possible before the members of the elder generation are gone. He told me that even if people in China aren’t currently interested in or ready for his films, future generations will be. (Hu 2009) In this way, Hu’s motivation for capturing China’s memoryscape is akin to the motivation of Chinese historians past, working in isolation to record the wrongs of a current dynasty in the hopes that they will be remembered by future dynasties. It seems Hu, in addition to his desire to create art, is driven by a strong archival impulse. For Wang Bing, on the other hand, He Fengming is the only documentary he has made focusing on the elderly and their individual histories. Wang’s other documentaries focus on contemporary issues, indicating he is probably not as driven by the same archival impulses as Hu. In this chapter I will discuss two of Hu’s recent films, In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao (Xunzhao Lin Zhao de linghun) and Though I Am Gone (Wo sui siqu), and one of Wang Bing’s, Fengming: A Chinese Memoir (He Fengming).

The chapter is divided into subsections. Each filmmaker and his film(s) will be discussed separately, beginning with a brief biography and followed by a close reading of his film(s). By analyzing their approaches to filmmaking, I attempt to better understand how their films act as counternarratives to official discourse.

4.2 Individual Bruises – Approaches to Documenting Personal Trauma

4.2.1 Hu Jie – Filmmaker Biography

In December of 2009 I attended the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) in Songzhuang. While there I had the good fortune to meet a number of young filmmakers, Lung Yingtai, in her 2009 book entitled Big River, Big Sea: 1949, undertook a project with similar goals: collecting personal stories about the effects of the Chinese civil war on families and individuals in both Taiwan and Mainland China.
most of whom seemed to know one another. They had formed a small community that met only once or twice a year at such festivals. When I told them that I was studying the films of both Hu Jie and Wang Bing, they told me that neither one was going to be in attendance but that Hu had a new film premiering there that year. The film was Hu's newest documentary, *National East Wind Farm*. I didn't get the impression that they knew him personally, but nearly everyone I met at the festival knew his name. Indeed, the night that his new film was screened the theater was filled to capacity, with perhaps 200 to 300 people. I agree with Shelly Kraicer's tentative conclusion that the organizers of BIFF seem very interested in film as social critique and that they believe film has an important role in fomenting social change. (Kraicer 2009) Thus, it seems logical that they would be supportive of and interested in Hu Jie's work.

The BIFF sold festival programs that contained bilingual (Chinese/English) descriptions of the films, as well as filmmaker biographies. Programs were available not only for the current festival, but also for previous years. Interestingly, most of the programs were printed in traditional characters, perhaps having been produced in Hong Kong. The filmmaker biographies generally included contact information, and that was how I obtained Hu Jie's email. After spending some time composing a polite message in Chinese, I emailed him in December 2008 to inquire about the possibility of an interview and whether I might somehow be able to get a copy of his newest film. Hu promptly replied to say that his current film was not yet finished and he was often away from home working on various films. However, he said I would be welcome if I was ever in Nanjing in the future.

I finally made the trip to Nanjing in March 2009, accompanied by Gary, a Chinese-
Canadian friend of mine studying in Shanghai, who I hoped would be helpful in case my Chinese failed me. On a sunny afternoon we made our way to Hu's home. To my surprise it was an airy, rather new apartment with a pretty view. The walls were hung with art, some of which were Hu Jie's own works. His wife, Hu Min, let us in and then went out to do some errands. Hu invited us to sit down. At first he seemed a bit wary and, as my friend and I later discussed, it was likely because he had been expecting two obvious foreigners, not one foreigner and one seemingly Chinese person. I had totally forgotten to think of my friend as anything but another foreigner in China. Thus, until he realized that Gary was not a fluent Mandarin speaker, I think he may have been understandably suspicious. Given the fact that this was our first meeting, I was uncomfortable with the idea of bringing a recording device, instead writing notes. I have rarely been as nervous or as excited as I was to meet Hu Jie in person. He was warm and welcoming, as well as patient if my questions were awkwardly phrased or unclear. If I had had the time and funds, and if Hu Jie had been willing, I would have liked to make several trips to Nanjing, but as it was, he chatted with me for about two hours. As we were preparing to leave he showed us some of his paintings, as well as some props for another documentary in production. One of the paintings was particularly moving to see in person, Hu Jie’s own portrait of Lin Zhao as she was last seen in prison, her mouth and face encased in gauze with only her eyes visible (see Figure 14 and Chapter 6.2). I felt privileged to see the painting that Hu Jie was inspired to create during the long process of making his documentary about such an exceptional woman. The interview was invaluable in helping me better understand his filmmaking process and his life.

Hu Jie (Figure 15) was born in Jinan, the capital of Shandong province, in 1958.
(Tao 2008: 28) His parents were factory workers. During the Cultural Revolution the education system was essentially shut down so Hu Jie often had no classes to attend. During what should have been his high school years, he worked in a machinery factory. (Pan 2008: 26) In 1977 he entered the army and served for 15 years. He held a number of different positions, first as a fighter jet mechanic, then as an officer, and finally as a political instructor at the Shanghai Air Force College (Shanghai kongjun zhengzhi xueyuan). (Tao 2008: 28; Pan 2008: 21) At some point during his military career, Hu Jie married and had a son.

Hu Jie had been interested in painting since he was young, so in 1989, while still in the military, he majored in oil painting at the Art College for the People’s Liberation Army. (Rui 2005) Following graduation he left the military and moved to an artist’s colony in Beijing at the Yuanming Yuan – the Old Summer Palace. He told me that at that point in his life he was unsure how to accurately record life; he saw the sharp contrast between impoverished lives and pretty paintings. (Hu 2009) As a result he decided to try using film to better reflect the realities of life; he got a handheld Hi8 camera and began filming his artist friends. It just happened that, soon after he began filming, the local authorities began to make life difficult for the artists of Yuanming Yuan, as well as for the landlords who rented to them. Hu explains:

The lifestyle of that artist community was very interesting and unique in China. Many artists lived in the same place, but each had their own style. No one imitated another ... [Yuanming Yuan] became a spotlight for attention from foreign countries, because many foreign newspapers reported on it and many foreigners were living there with Chinese artists ... The Beijing municipal
government felt that the situation in the artist village was out of control and decided to obliterate it. (Rui 2005)

Beginning in May 1995, Hu Jie intermittently filmed the community as it went into decline, and by December of that same year he had finished gathering footage. However, he had no access to editing equipment and thus was unable to complete the film. A friend who worked within the state media industry came to the rescue by allowing Hu to come after hours and make use of editing equipment. The friend, who had previously studied in Japan, also introduced Hu to a Japanese director who gave him an editing class of sorts, in spite of the fact that neither one spoke the other’s language. Thus, his first documentary, entitled The Artists of Yuanmingyuan (Yuanmingyuan de yishujiamen) was completed.

In June 1995, Hu Jie traveled to a mine in the Qilian mountains in Qinghai Province. He had previously been there as part of his art school training, and he had witnessed the hard lives of the mineworkers in the area. He felt it was a good documentary topic, and therefore returned to the area and began filming. The mine authorities would not give him permission to film, so he “went underground,” living with the miners, filming their daily routines and working conditions. After two months, however, he was discovered and was chased away at gunpoint. He did not obtain all the footage he wanted, but what he had gathered became his second film, Remote Mountain (Yuan Shan). (Zhai 2008) At the same time that he was working on his second film, he was also working on another documentary entitled Migration (Qianxi) for which he followed a group of nomadic Tibetans as they moved their herds to new pastures in the spring, summer and fall. Working on multiple projects at the same time appears to be
Hu’s standard creative process. (Hu 2009)

In the midst of all this documentary work, Hu Jie was hired at the Centre for Pictures of Xinhua News Agency where he worked as a cameraman and producer. (Rui 2005) His responsibilities at Xinhua included creating “video reports for private screening by party officials across the country.” (Pan 2008: 23) When he was not occupied with this work, he would travel throughout the country in order to make his own documentary films (See Appendix 1 for a complete filmography). In August 1995 he made a film called *Matchmaker (Meipo)* about matchmaking in rural China. That same year he also began work on another documentary called *Shengsheng bu xi* which followed a young rural couple from Shandong who, in order to have both a son and a daughter, violated the one-child policy. From 1996 to 1998, Hu Jie worked on a series of short films about migrant workers. Between 1997 and 1998 he worked on two short documentaries, one about folk theatre in Shandong and another about a Christian house church in Nanjing, respectively.

Not long after the above films were completed, Hu Jie first heard about Lin Zhao, a young woman who had been imprisoned during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and later executed during the Cultural Revolution. In spite of her imprisonment, she had used her own blood as ink to write protests against Mao and the politics of the time. Hu Jie has described learning about her story for the first time:

I had never heard this kind of story: that one was arrested for writing poetry and killed for writing books with blood. I never thought that in Mao's China there was this kind of people who would fight against the Communist Party, literally with blood. I thought that writing with blood could only write a few characters, but I
was told that Lin Zhao wrote thousands and thousands of characters with blood. This story was so shocking that I began to collect information and materials about Lin Zhao. I wanted to know her. (Rui 2005)

Only a month after Hu Jie began researching Lin Zhao’s story he was called in to speak with his boss. Hu was told that he could either choose voluntarily to resign or he would be fired. He describes the moment as follows:

He was very serious and said, “What you are doing, you know best. We do not want to know. You have two choices. One is to be fired from your job; the other is to resign by yourself.” I thought it would be terrible to be fired, so I chose to resign. They did not tell me why, but I know clearly: I was doing research on Lin Zhao. They also told me that they did like me very much because I was one of the major hands at the Centre, but they could not allow me to continue working there due to pressure from above. Who is above Xinhua News Agency? I understand that must be The Bureau of Public Safety. (Rui 2005)

After resigning from Xinhua in 1999, Hu Jie became what he terms a full-time “documentary film labourer” (Zhai 2008). He has continued to make other documentaries, most of which I have unfortunately been unable to see. (See Appendix 1) However, during a film festival at the Songzhuang Arts Center I was able to find an artist-approved but unofficial DVD of Hu Jie’s two earliest films, Remote Mountain and The Artists of Yuanmingyuan. The DVD was produced by Fanhall Films but I do not know if Hu Jie receives a cut of any profit, or how Fanhall decides upon which films to release. These two early films are very different in style from his later films; they are largely observational with no authorial voice. Remote Mountain is particularly affecting
simply because of the tragic, dangerous conditions in which the miners work, but neither film struck me as being exceptional in narrative structure or content. Pan has stated they “were not truly subversive, but they cast a critical eye on Chinese society and that was usually enough to alarm the…propaganda ministry.” (2008: 23)

According to Hu, until 1999 all of his films were circulated only through friends, not through any official channels. (Hu 2008: 69) After 1999, some of his films have been distributed through official channels outside of Mainland China (he told me that the Chinese University of Hong Kong distributes some of his titles), but not within the Mainland. I did ask him about whether he considered his films underground (dixia) or independent (duli). He stated that the term independent was more accurate, since the government is aware of everything he does but they generally let him be. (Hu 2009) He tends to work alone, and he also told me that he does not attend film festivals because he does not want to bring trouble for the organizers. It is within this context that Hu Jie continues to make documentaries focusing on marginalized people, including the subjects of the two films under investigation in this thesis, *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* (1999-2005) and *Though I Am Gone* (2006).

### 4.2.2 Hu Jie’s *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao*

Hu Jie began work on directing, producing and editing the documentary *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* (*Xunzhao Lin Zhao de linghun*) in 1999. The film took several years to complete because it required a great deal of research and it took time for Hu Jie to make connections with interviewees and to decide on the narrative structure of the film. In the course of translating the film, I came to realize that there is more than one version. This is supported by Pan’s statement that Hu Jie first began distributing the film
in an unfinished form in the fall of 2003 and that, as this VCD version passed from hand-to-hand, he would receive new information and would then add that information to new versions of the film. (Pan 2008: 76-77) Hu Jie confirmed this for me when I interviewed him in March 2009, stating that he has no idea how many versions are out there, but that he tends to make several edits of all of his films, distributing each version among friends. He was not worried about people seeing earlier or later versions, and he welcomed people to copy and pass on any version. (Hu 2009) Thus, I do not know how many versions actually exist but I have access to two: (1) the version on Youtube (“Jilupian” 2006); and (2) An online Chinese transcript of a second version. (“Xunzhao” n.d.) In my translation in Chapter 6, I have attempted to point out all the differences between the Youtube edit and the transcript. Because I only have access to one film version (and a text transcript of a second version), I do not know how similar or dissimilar they are visually, but based upon the Chinese script I do not think that the versions are significantly different. With the exception of three short extra interviews about Zhang Chunyuan, a rightist who associated with Lin Zhao, and the inclusion of a letter Lin Zhao wrote from prison to her mother listing all the foods she longed to eat, the changes seem to be quite minimal.

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9 The blogger Zhai Minglei recently published an interview with Hu Jie online. (See Chapter 6.2) Among the responses to the article is a request for information about where to find Hu Jie’s films. Wang responded saying that although some of Hu Jie’s films are available, In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao can only be obtained through unofficial, hand-to-hand distribution between friends (cong pengyou na shoushou xiangchuangye). (Zhai 2008) One must assume that this is also the case for Though I Am Gone, the second of Hu Jie’s films discussed in this thesis. This assumption is supported by Youqin Wang’s statement that the film has circulated in VCD form in an unofficial manner since its release. (Wang 2007b, 76) It is also supported by a recent article written by Hu himself in which he says that people often tell him they have personally “burned hundreds of copies of your films and handed them out to friends,” or that they have seen the films online. (Hu 2008: 69) He confirmed for me in a 2009 interview that he has no objections to hand-to-hand distribution and pirating of his films, as that helps them to be seen by the intended audience – Chinese people. (Hu 2009)
In 1999, when Hu Jie began filming this documentary, the predominant style of narrative among Chinese filmmakers working outside of the state system was extremely observational, characterized by long takes, no narration, and sometimes very little editing. This style continues to be popular in the present day. It was seen as a way for directors to “resist the propagandist tradition of the ‘voice of the Party’ implicit in the dominant direct-address style of official documentary and news programmes.” (Zhang 2004: 123) By using this style of narration, these directors could make claims to truth, reality and objectivity that were lacking in official narratives. (Zhang 2006: 24) According to Hu himself, all of his earlier films were “what would in professional circles be called ‘naturalistic,’ where the author’s voice is absent.” (Hu 2008: 69) They were “all set in the present…with few sit-down interviews and little narration.” (Pan 2008: 29) This narrative style, however, can result in several problems, most prominently the “self-erasure of the documentarist,” who seems to lack the confidence to shape the film through more structured editing and narrative. (Zhang 2004: 126) In my experience, it also makes it difficult to produce films about complex topics that are both interesting and easy for audiences to follow.

As Hu Jie gathered his research for the film about Lin Zhao he came to realize that the topic was extremely complex and that it involved a great deal of history about which even he was unaware. Thus, instead of following an observational narrative style, he chose to structure his film in a manner that would include interviews, historical footage, and narration. Such a structure would provide many viewers with an entirely new perspective on the history they had learned in school, ensuring that “those in power no longer monopolize the acts of memory and oversight.” (Hu 2008: 73) Hu Jie’s
filmmaking, while motivated partly by artistic concerns, seems to have been driven more by the simple desire to share information, “restoring a shattered history and collective memory.” (Hu 2008: 73) Thus, his narrative structure is highly edited with the intention of providing a broader context and background for the viewer.

*In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* tells the story of Lin Zhao, born Peng Lingzhao, a young woman who was executed in 1968 (see Figure 16 for a photograph of her as a teenager). Lin Zhao was born in 1932 in Suzhou and came from a very politically active, educated family. Her father, Peng Guoyan, had studied abroad and was later appointed county magistrate in Suzhou, where he worked under the Nationalist government. Lin Zhao’s mother, Xu Xianmin, was very active in the community and was perhaps better known than her father. (Zhang 2008) Xu became a supporter of the Communist rebels and was deeply involved in the anti-Japanese resistance, while her husband was more involved in Nationalist politics. Thus, Lin Zhao was raised in a politically divided household and the subject of her political education was often a point of conflict between her parents. (Zhang 2008)

The young Lin Zhao became a supporter of the Communist rebels and, demonstrating her natural gift for writing, she composed essays criticizing the corruption of the Nationalist government. Lin Zhao was the pen name she used for these compositions and later became the name used by all of her friends. As a result of these activities, Lin Zhao was placed on the blacklist of the Suzhou City Defense headquarters. In 1949, she decided to attend the Communist-run Sunan College of Journalism, which was in a Communist-controlled region near Suzhou. Her parents did not approve of this plan and wanted to send her to America, away from the civil war in China. Lin Zhao
refused to obey her parents and instead ran away from home and enrolled at the college. (Pan 2008: 30) Not long afterwards, the Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China.

While at Sunan College, Lin Zhao and her fellow students became involved in the Land Reform movement. They were sent to the countryside to help organize and direct the redistribution of property formerly owned by landlords among the common people. At this time, Lin Zhao was a fervent supporter of Mao and she enthusiastically participated in the task of destroying the power and prestige of landlords. However, she was unhappy with the conduct of the cadres in her Land Reform group; in spite of the fact that most of them were married, many of the male cadres had begun new relationships, leaving their first wives behind in the countryside. Lin Zhao spoke out against this practice, which did little more than make her a target of criticism by the other members of her Land Reform group.

By 1952, Lin Zhao had completed her studies and the Land Reform movement was completed, so she was assigned to work at the Changzhou People’s Newspaper. She stayed there until 1954, when, having achieved the best exam score in Jiangsu province, she was accepted at Beijing University (Beida) in the Department of Chinese Literature. Once at Beida, she quickly became a popular student.

In 1956, Mao began the Hundred Flowers Campaign, which encouraged Chinese citizens, particularly intellectuals, to offer their suggestions and criticisms of the Communist Party. (Spence 1990: 568) The response began slowly, but by the spring of 1957 had gained momentum, particularly on university campuses. Students began posting big character posters, sparking a chain reaction of posters both critical of and supportive
of the government. The government was surprised by the criticism, and ultimately the Hundred Flowers Campaign resulted in the identification, targeting and purging of so-called rightists. Thus began the Anti-Rightist Campaign in July 1957. (Spence 1990: 572)

At Beida, the campaign resulted in struggle sessions against students who had posted critical big character posters. Lin Zhao was not struggled against directly, but, during a criticism session for a fellow student, Zhang Yuanxun, she stood and spoke out against the critics. This led to her being labeled a rightist. She refused to do a self-criticism, and was sentenced to reform through labour on Beida campus. While there she met another rightist, Gan Cui. The two of them ultimately attempted to marry but were denied permission.

In 1959 Lin Zhao left Beida on medical leave, returning to the Suzhou area. While there, she connected with students from Gansu province, with whom she published an underground magazine called “Spark” (Xinghuo). Motivation for this illegal action was provided in part by the large-scale famine that was ongoing at the time, a result of poor government policies during the Great Leap Forward. (Pan 2008: 56) Thousands of people across the country were starving to death. As a result of her underground activities, Lin Zhao was arrested in 1960 and sentenced to prison. In March 1962, she was briefly released on medical leave, but by December of the same year she was once again imprisoned.

While in jail, Lin Zhao was not initially allowed to have pen or paper, so she used her blood as ink and wrote on cloth, on the walls, on anything she could find. At some point, she was given a pen and paper that she used to recopy some of the blood-ink writings. During her time in prison she wrote about her loneliness, her anger, her outrage
and her faith in Christianity, among other things. Relatively little is known about Lin Zhao’s daily life in jail, but it is certain that at least one jailhouse officer preserved her writing and passed it on to her younger sister. (Zhai 2008; See also Chapter 6.2) On April 29, 1968, Lin Zhao was executed, but it is not known who gave the order to do so.

The film opens with Hu Jie directly speaking to the camera as he describes what led him to pursue Lin Zhao’s narrative. He states that, after hearing about her, he went on a journey to rediscover Lin Zhao’s soul. This is followed by scenes of the landscape outside a moving train window, which immediately draw us into Hu Jie’s mission, and includes us in his search for Lin Zhao’s story and her soul. We end up at the Shanghai train station, where the camera focuses briefly upon a bright poster celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. The poster has a colourful painting of a happy crowd of Chinese citizens, waving multi-coloured pompoms over their heads. They are all standing in front of Tiananmen Square, with the giant portrait of Mao central to the image, as well as the slogans on either side of the portrait: “Long Live the People’s Republic of China. Long Live the Great Unity of the World’s Peoples.” Next to this painting is the sentence: “Of one heart and one mind, the masses rush towards the new century.” This image is immediately followed by an interview with Ni Jingxiong, an elderly woman who was once a classmate and friend of Lin Zhao. Ni Jingxiong describes how, according to the jail doctor, Lin Zhao was taken directly from her sick bed in the jail clinic to her execution. Thus, the film immediately sets up a disconnect between glowing official state narratives and more painful, individual narratives. It is difficult to view the poster at the Shanghai train station positively after hearing Ni Jingxiong’s story. The contrast between the two scenes also
seems to imply that in the rush towards the new century, there is little encouragement
given to those who wish to look to the past and better understand it.

Following the interview with Ni Jingxiong, Hu Jie makes his way to Tilanqiao
prison, where Lin Zhao was imprisoned. Although he is not allowed to enter the building,
he lets us see that it still exists, filming it from outside its closed doors. Hu Jie’s lack of
access to the prison and other such official spaces is (perhaps unintentionally) indicative
of the separation between the state and the individual and the lack of access that the
average person has to the official domain, including official archives of the past.

Throughout the film, Hu Jie reads Lin Zhao’s prison writings out loud while the
camera lingers on their image. Whenever her words appear on screen, the lighting
becomes a reddish-orange blood colour, which may simply have been the result of
filming conditions. It is notable, however, that, when Hu Jie films other documents, such
as the jailhouse reports, the light is stark and white. Hu Jie may have made these different
lighting choices in an effort to contrast the coldness of officialdom with the warmth of
one individual human being shedding and using her own blood as ink to express her
deeply felt personal convictions.

As Hu Jie travels to new places to interview people who knew Lin Zhao, he
sometimes prefaces the interviews with images of the city where the interview is taking
place. He tends to choose images of places that are connected to state power. For
example, when he travels to Beijing he films Tiananmen Square, with its portrait of Mao
and its surrounding slogans, and the Great Hall of the People, China’s parliament
building. While such images serve to place the interviewees in specific geographical
locations, they also contrast with the humble private homes of the interviewees.
Similarly, when Hu Jie visits cities and towns formerly inhabited by Lin Zhao, he finds that the locations intact to the present day tend to be those that are part of state infrastructure; for example, Tilanqiao jail and Beijing University Campus. The locations that have been destroyed or hugely altered tend to be those that belong to the private realm: Lin Zhao’s family home in Suzhou, for example, or the village church in which she lived during Land Reform, or even the apartment where her mother once lived in Shanghai, which now houses a family that has never heard of the previous residents. While Hu Jie may not have consciously intended to highlight this contrast, it is interesting to note the ways in which private spatial realms are often altered or erased, while public spatial realms, those dominated by the state, endure. This mirrors the ways in which private memories are obliterated within the larger project of official historical narratives.

The film is structured in such a way as to guide the viewer through Lin Zhao’s evolution from teenager fully in support of Mao and the Communist Party to adult woman diametrically opposed to both. This approach is very effective, presenting Lin Zhao as a real, fallible human being. The viewer is prevented from oversimplifying or idealizing her as a one-dimensional, perfect individual who could do no wrong (as heroes in the officially sanctioned stories tend to be portrayed). It should be noted, however, that some of the negative details about Lin Zhao’s early devotion to the party are not included in the versions of the film to which I have access. For example, according to Zhai (2008; see also Chapter 6.2), during the Land Reform movement, Lin Zhao forced a landlord to immerse himself in a vat of freezing cold water; she told people that “his screams made her feel ‘cruel happiness’” because residents of the village would no longer be afraid of
the man.” (Pan 2008: 32) In a letter to a friend, Lin Zhao wrote of witnessing the executions of ten people, “Seeing them die this way, I felt as proud and happy as the people who had directly suffered under them.” (Pan 2008: 32) Including such details could have made the film even stronger, as it would have provided a typical example of how, in the heat of a political movement, people can change from victimizer to victimized. It is this layer of complexity that perhaps contributes to the reluctance of many to reflect upon or revisit traumatic periods in China’s recent history. It is possible such details are included in other edits. Nonetheless, in the versions to which I have access, Hu Jie still makes it clear to the viewer that Lin Zhao was initially a fervent and enthusiastic supporter of the Communist Party.

By filming small details, such as the fact that Lin Zhao often signed her letters to Ni Jingxiong by drawing a little cat instead of her name, the audience is given a glimpse into Lin Zhao’s youth and personality at the time. She initially was strongly in support of the Land Reform movement, even helping to drive out a church pastor and watching executions, but by the end of her life, Lin Zhao was strongly opposed to the government, stubbornly refusing to recant any of her views. Throughout her life, then, Lin Zhao was true to her convictions, and would not violate her strongly held beliefs. The film recites Lin Zhao’s jailhouse writings, in which she reflects upon her youthful idealism and how it was used and manipulated by the state “to stir us up and order us about.” (Chapter 6.1, page 123) Lin Zhao felt angry about being manipulated, but she must also have felt guilty about her own sometimes violent actions during the Land Reform movement. By examining her own complicity in such brutal behavior towards landlords, Lin Zhao must have been among a small minority. Her ability to recognize her errors in retrospect must
have made her awakening all the more bitter. By including in the film Lin Zhao’s own condemnation of the state’s attempts to control the behaviour of China’s youth, viewers might question whether such manipulations continue in the present day.

The film is filled with archival footage, both visual and audio. Hu Jie has collected numerous photographs of Lin Zhao and her friends, making their stories more accessible, but he has also included a great deal of imagery of Mao and of China from 1949 to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. He includes brief footage of large-scale patriotic performances of the song, *Ode to the Motherland* (*changge zuguo*). This footage provides historical context that may be lacking in the awareness of many viewers in China, particularly if they were born long after the events in the film. The glorified imagery of official events, of official places such as Tiananmen and the sound of official music and slogans, such as ‘Long Live Chairman Mao,’ provide a sharp contrast to the violence experienced by Lin Zhao and many of the interviewees. By including such official imagery in the film, Hu Jie re-inscribes their meanings. Images that may once have seemed triumphant, such as photographs of hundreds of people marching with banners proclaiming the Great Leap Forward, or the elaborate music and dance performances put on by the state, are transformed into bizarre and sinister relics from a disastrous time period.

A powerful aspect of *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* relates to the number of people interviewed in the film, and the extreme nature of so many of their partially told stories. By giving them a voice, Hu Jie demonstrates that many people were personally impacted by the political movements of those decades. The stories of his subjects, finally given voice, hint at how many people have yet to recount their own personal histories.
Most of the interviewees are elderly, and are therefore potentially marginalized by mainstream society. Nearly all of them experienced hardship during the Mao era but many of their memories and experiences remain unacceptable for mainstream consumption and are considered irrelevant in the present era. Nonetheless, given the similarities between their stories of hardship, their experiences seem quite typical of that era. This contrast is powerful in that it demonstrates how the personal memories of these interviewees have been marginalized in spite of their typicality. The fact that so much remains unknown, not only about Lin Zhao’s story but also about the stories of so many other people, demonstrates the knowledge that is excluded from the official collective memory in China today.

The need for speedy and timely collection of the stories of China’s elders is demonstrated in the film when an elderly man named Zhu Guo, who was once a classmate of Lin Zhao, comes to visit Zhang Yuanxun, another of Lin Zhao’s acquaintances. Zhu Guo’s wife also knew Lin Zhao, but since she passed away not long before the film was made, her stories will remain untold. The people whose stories remain to be recorded will not be around forever, and their stories are rapidly disappearing. In Pan’s recent book he describes Hu Jie’s successful attempts to track down Lin Zhao’s prison doctor. When Hu finally meets the old man he is disappointed to find that he is “nearly senile” and no longer recalls anything about Lin Zhao. (Pan 2008: 73)

Hu Jie has mentioned in interviews and articles that, while researching his documentary, he was incredibly shocked, not only by Lin Zhao’s story, but also by what he learned about the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward and the various political
campaigns that affected so many people. Until he spoke with people like Huang Zheng, who had lived through the famine and seen so many people starve to death, Hu Jie had always believed that the famine “had been limited in scale and [was] the result of three difficult years of natural disasters.” (Pan 2008: 54) After speaking with so many people who directly witnessed the famine and the concurrent political campaigns, Hu Jie came to realize that there was a great deal of information missing from his knowledge of recent history. Lin Zhao’s story encompasses three of the least systematically examined periods of recent Chinese history: the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the mass famines of the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. Hu is a former member of the military, and he therefore had more access than the average Chinese person to prohibited materials. The fact that he was relatively (although not entirely) unaware of such historical traumas indicates how possible it is for Chinese citizens to be unaware of China’s recent history. (Pan 2008: 29) Such lack of awareness is likely the result of factors more complicated than simply state censorship, including the reluctance of many people to share their traumatic experiences with children and grandchildren. Hu also lays some of the blame on the “cold callousness” of younger generations, who prevent their parents from recounting their stories or accuse Hu of making up history “to win prizes overseas.” (Hu 2008: 72) In my interview with him, Hu stated that even his university-aged son is rather ambivalent about his father’s films. The state-controlled educational system and the largely state-controlled media continue to play major roles in shaping collective memory and historical narratives simply by virtue of the history they choose to include and omit.10

10 As an aside, a recent project to commemorate an important historical moment resulted in a large-scale painting called Aggrieved Earth. Rebirth (Ditong. Chongsheng). The painting depicts Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao’s visit to the scene of the Sichuan earthquake.
4.2.3 Hu Jie’s *Though I am Gone*

The documentary *Though I am Gone* (*Wo sui siqu*) was completed in 2006. It was initially scheduled to debut at the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YunFest) in April 2007. At the last minute, however, the entire festival was suspended, reportedly due to official objections to the presence of *Though I am Gone* in the selected films. (Pan 2008: 79; Hu 2008: 73) The documentary tells the story of Bian Zhongyun, (see Figure 17) the principal of the Girl’s Middle school attached to Beijing Normal University, who died from a beating in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. At the time of her death Bian’s husband, Wang Jingyao (Figure 18), took photographs of her dead body, of their grieving children, and of the big character posters that were pasted throughout her home by female students. Wang also saved material evidence such as

The painting was a collaborative effort by 140 painters, including one French artist whose name is given in a newspaper article only as Pascal. It was completed over the course of 18 days and was exhibited in the Guangdong Art Gallery. It is unclear to me if it was a commissioned work or something simply spearheaded by Lin Yongkang, the vice-president of the Guangdong Painting Studio, but it is extremely interesting to see how the painting attempts to shape a particular historical moment. In one scene, Hu Jintao is somewhat idealized, in that he is taller and thinner than in reality (a technique reminiscent of old propaganda posters in which Mao towered over everyone), while Wen Jiabao is shown examining a child and surrounded by efficient-looking, uniformed female nurses who were not present in reality. A *Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) article about the project devotes most of its time to Pascal and his opinions about the differences between the overly critical Western attitude towards politicians and the more respectful Chinese attitudes. (Zhu 2008; Mu 2008) Whatever motivated the project, it is interesting that the two politicians are presented in an idealized fashion, and that the rescue site is made to seem much more efficient that it perhaps actually was. The project may simply be an attempt to humanize a traumatic event or it may be a recent example of an official attempt to shape collective memory to remember this visit instead of the images of collapsed schools and dead or injured schoolchildren. I suspect it is the latter.

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11 Information on this film and the festival is currently available mainly online. Among the first to cover the story was the Danwei website. As of May 10th, 2007, the original page is available only as an image file because “the text of this entry trips the keyword filters of mainland Chinese ISPs.” (Goldkorn 2007)

12 The Girl’s school was close to “the central government and State Council” which, alongside its reputation for excellence meant that it “was invariably attended by many daughters of China’s top leaders.” (Wang 2007a)
Bian’s bloodied clothing and other documentation. Through eyewitness interviews, the film reconstructs the events that led to Bian’s death, and it also highlights Wang’s attempts to receive some sort of official justice for the crime. Radio broadcasts and photographs from the start of the Cultural Revolution are extensively used to evoke the atmosphere of the time. The film is a powerful visual document that recounts a historical period in terms not generally addressed by official narratives. The heart of the film is in its depiction of individual pain, the lasting effects of trauma and the power of individuals to capture and share unofficial, personal images and versions of history.

*Though I Am Gone* opens first with an aural rather than a visual scene: the ticking of a clock. The black screen combined with the sound of the ticking produce a quiet, yet ominous atmosphere. The clock’s gears come into view through a slow pan down the axis of the pendulum swinging back-and-forth. This is followed by a scene, in black and white, in which an unseen person manipulates an obviously old camera. From the very start of the documentary, then, both the passing of time (the clock ticking away) and the ability to capture moments of that time (through technology like the camera) are presented as connected events. Photographs can capture images of an event that has long receded into the past, allowing the moment, in a sense, to remain, much as memories remain for those individuals traumatized by the event. Thus photographs, with their ability to communicate and validate the experiences of trauma victims, can be used as a tool for teaching those who were not involved in what actually happened and what it

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13 Hu Jie first became aware of Bian Zhongyun’s story through Wang Youqin, the professor from the University of Chicago interviewed in the documentary. Wang contacted Hu and suggested he meet with Wang Jingyao. In spite of Wang Jingyao’s determination to document his wife’s death in order to obtain some kind of justice, it took six months for Wang to agree to be filmed. He later told Hu that he finally decided to participate after seeing *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao*. (Hu 2009)
actually meant. Photographs can act as proof of atrocities that have been denied or forgotten by the public; *Though I Am Gone* is centered around just such a set of photographs. The painful, individual realities of Wang’s photographs are in stark contrast to official narratives which tend to be built around the framework of a glorified nation-state.

Wang Jingyao was meticulous in his attempts to record the events surrounding the death of his wife. As previously mentioned, he photographed his wife’s dead body and the big character posters students had written to condemn her, but he also saved her bloodied, stained clothing, and any documents related to the event. Without these artifacts of pain, particularly the disturbing visual images, would Hu Jie, the director, have been able to tell this story so effectively?\(^{14}\) The visual has the power to shock and to authenticate; Wang’s obvious determination and his choice as an individual to use a camera to record his own personal trauma and history is what has allowed him to tell his story and is part of what makes it compelling, believable and difficult for official sources to deny.

Wang Jingyao is definitely the focus of the film. His personal obsession with the case, as well as his palpable pain, are evident throughout. This long-lasting pain is particularly present in the scene when he discusses the secret bookcase altar he and his children constructed to hide and honor Bian’s ashes. (Having been condemned as a capitalist roader her ashes were therefore unwelcome anywhere else). The lasting effects of trauma are perhaps most obvious and devastating when Wang breaks down while

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\(^{14}\) As will be discussed later in this paper, Wang Bing’s film completely avoids providing any supplementary visual or textual documentation, choosing instead to rely only on the voice of the elderly He Fengming. The question of effectiveness is entirely subjective, but I will address some of the structural differences between the films.
describing how, after his wife’s death, he and his children would still stare out the window from which they used to watch her come and go, hoping in vain that she would return. When Wang refers to his continued attempts to reveal and remember the details of his wife’s death, he uses the word *zeren* or ‘duty’ to describe the responsibility he carries. It is interesting to think about Wang’s understanding of the meaning of the word *ze*, a word so commonly used in the context of various government slogans in the phrase *renren you ze* (everyone has a duty). Certainly the dogged pursuit of personal justice and the preservation of difficult memories are not the sorts of duties the government has in mind. Wang hopes that all of his documents will eventually be placed in a Cultural Revolution Museum, something Ba Jin also called for. (Barmé and Minford 1989: 381-384)

Through his photographs and other materials Wang has managed to capture and share (to a limited extent) an unofficial, personal version of history. His willingness to discuss the past is unusual. When the director tracks down a teacher who, forty years earlier, wrote Wang an anonymous letter about the circumstances of Bian’s death, she refuses to be interviewed or to appear on camera because she feels the time is not yet right. The fact that many of the students at the Girl’s Middle School were children of the CCP elite may increase the reluctance of some witnesses to come forward, but this

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15 In an indication that there is a desire among some Chinese people to reexamine this historical period, a privately funded Cultural Revolution Museum was opened in 2005 in Shantou, Guangdong. (Cody 2005) The South China Morning Post has stated that “the museum is far from provocative…nowhere to be seen are the era's posters covered with huge characters, the Red Guard memorabilia or tall dunce hats that were used in public denunciations - all of which would have probably agitated officials.” (Leu 2005) In spite of this, the museum’s founder was apparently prevented from publicizing the project and it is obviously a topic that still makes the state nervous. I do not know anything about the current status of this museum.
reluctance to speak seems also to be part of an established culture of silence when
discussing certain historical events in Mainland China. (Wang 2007a).

Hu Jie makes interesting use of official narratives and imagery by incorporating
archival radio broadcasts and footage into the documentary. When Wang begins
describing the struggle sessions held against his wife the viewer sees scenes from the
Cultural Revolution and hears cheerful music from the time. This technique, which often
makes the events of Bian’s death seem even more poignant and disturbing, continues
throughout the film. Some of the archival footage is also accompanied by the sound of
the ticking clock, making scenes that may have once seemed progressive now seem
ominous and terrifying. The archival footage and radio broadcasts are often separated
from the conversations with Wang Jingyao and other witnesses by a short close-up of the
old camera taking a picture. This serves to highlight the extreme contrast between
sanitized official collective memory and the traumatic individual memories of Wang and
the others interviewed.

In addition to the film’s central narrative of Bian’s death, a story that is highly
personal yet also full of universal human emotions, Hu Jie adds another element that
personalizes the narratives of some of the multiple victims of the Cultural Revolution.
The film closes with a list of the names of some of the numerous victims in Beijing – a
sort of recognition and memorial.\textsuperscript{16} While the names appear on the screen, the viewer
hears an old radio broadcast imploring young Chinese people to criticize and expose the
bourgeoisie and other counterrevolutionaries. Thus, the vast distinction between official

\textsuperscript{16} Although the film does not provide a source for these names, it is likely that they came
from Wang Youqin. She attended the girl’s school where Bian was principal, leaving the
viewer to wonder at her role during the struggle sessions. She maintains an online
and unofficial narratives of history and trauma is again emphasized. Until some sort of official memorial or museum is built to remember the victims and the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution (and other devastating events that occurred under the rule of the CCP), unofficial visual media, such as *Though I Am Gone*, are the only places where they can be memorialized.

Wang is not idealized and he is, at least in the eyes of the CCP, far from being the perfect PRC citizen. In the early forties he was an advocate for democracy, while his wife was a member of the Communist Party from 1941 onwards. (Wang 2007a) Although he is an atheist he claims to find a great deal of inspiration in Christian imagery and ideals. Thus, in contrast to Lin Zhao who claimed to be a devout Christian, Wang Jingyao is more of a cultural Christian. It is interesting the way in which Christianity is somewhat idealized in both of Hu Jie’s films; it becomes identified with a more civil society. When I interviewed Hu, I asked about Christianity in these two films. He stated that he felt it was a tool of resistance for both Lin Zhao and Wang Jingyao. He felt Wang saw love in Christianity, something that was entirely lacking in *geming*, and that this was seen as a way to achieve some sort of freedom or democracy. (Hu 2009) Hu himself is not religious and has stated that just being alive on earth is happiness enough. (Zhu and Wan 2005: 30) Finally, after his wife’s death, Wang wrote a letter requesting leave to handle his wife’s funeral. In this letter he used the revolutionary language of the time and criticized himself and another colleague, Qi Shiqian; Wang promised he would reform himself and make a clean break with this colleague. According to Hu, Qi Shiqian was a historian who committed suicide at some point during the Cultural Revolution. (Hu 2009) The fact that Wang himself resorted to naming another colleague demonstrates the
complexities of that time period and how one can be both victim and victimizer in chaos.

In spite of Wang Jingyao’s less than ‘ideal’ characteristics, he is nonetheless a citizen of China and his history is part of the country’s history. By making a film about Wang, Hu Jie contests official approaches to the history of the Cultural Revolution, generally characterized by silence and a forgetting of its victims. Thus, *Though I Am Gone* focuses on individual heartache and pain and places it within the context of larger historical events, while official narratives often strive to forget the details of the past, ignoring individual injustices in favor of an inflexible single moral verdict about the event and silencing alternative voices.

*Though I Am Gone* is not a perfect documentary – at times more exposition could have been helpful, particularly when Wang and Hu discuss the lawsuit Wang brought against Yuan Shu’e, the apparent ringleader of the beating. According to Hu, Yuan Shu’e was an average cadre who worked outside of the school, but who came to accuse Bian during struggle sessions. (Hu 2009) This and other information was likely still too sensitive to discuss in detail. According to Pan, nearly everyone Hu Jie tracked down to discuss the death of Bian Zhongyun, both former students and teachers, refused to speak with him. (Pan 2008: 79) Wang Jingyao apparently wanted the film to include “his suspicion the authorities never fully investigated his wife’s death because so many if the girls at the school were the children of senior leaders.” (Pan 2008: 79) This topic was almost certainly too sensitive and therefore is only obliquely implied in the final documentary. In spite of the film’s weaknesses, it provides a space for an individual to relate his own history – a history that may not appeal to leadership, but that is necessary for a more truthful vision of the complexity of the past. Unfortunately, because the film is
unavailable in China through any official channels, many, but certainly not all, of its viewers will be either overseas Chinese or other foreigners. During my residence in Beijing in 2008/2009, I mentioned this film to many Chinese friends and only those with connections to the film or arts community tended to have heard of it. *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* is better known, but still not exceptionally so. Nonetheless, *Though I Am Gone* has been an inspiration for at least one Chinese artist: Xu Weixin, a painter based out of Beijing. In 2007 he created large-scale images of Bian Zhongyun and her husband for an exhibition entitled *Chinese Historical Figures 1966 – 1976 (Lishi zhongguo zhongshengxiang 1966-1976)*. This exhibition consisted of portraits of both well-known political figures and lesser-known average people, creating something that contrasted private and the public spheres, and questioned collective memory and personal narratives. (Xu 2007)

Given the subjects of his documentaries, Hu Jie is not unfamiliar with controversy or censorship. His films focus on challenging “official Chinese historical narratives while providing visual details in order to, in Hu Jie's own words, ‘remember history.’” (Rui 2005) Hu thus recognizes the power of visual forms of documentation for contesting official narratives. In spite of losing his job and, at times, being put under surveillance by undercover police, Hu Jie has continued to make documentaries about issues that make the authorities uncomfortable. He states that his goal is “to make films for the Chinese. I want us to look at our own history and reality.” (Rui 2005) He told me that he has many more documentaries in production simply because he is rushing to document the stories of so many elderly people before it becomes too late. (Hu 2009)
4.2.4 Wang Bing – Filmmaker Biography

Wang Bing was born in Jingyang country in Shaanxi province in 1967. ("Tie Xi Qu" 2006) He grew up in the countryside, attending a rural school and herding sheep, until the unexpected death of his father when he was 14 years old. (Zhang 2005) As a result of the death, Wang Bing quit school and went to work at the Xi’an Architectural Design Research Institute, which was where his father had been employed. (Zhang 2005) For the next ten years Wang Bing was the main breadwinner for the family. In 1991 he finally returned to school after being accepted at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang, in Northeastern Liaoning Province. He graduated in 1992 with a Bachelor of Arts in photography and was accepted soon after into the prestigious Beijing Film Academy. There he studied cinematography, graduating in 1995. Wang Bing wanted to shoot feature films, but did not have enough money to remain in Beijing, so he returned to Shenyang. (Robinson 2007: 22) It was only when it became clear that the “technical, logistical, and financial demands of [a feature film] were significantly beyond his means,” that Wang Bing decided to make a documentary film. (Robinson 2007: 25) This is very much in contrast to Hu Jie who seems to have always been determined to make documentaries.

Wang Bing rented a DV camera and moved into the industrial Tiexi district in Shenyang. This district had been “China’s oldest and largest industrial base” for fifty years. (Robinson 2007: 22) During his undergraduate studies he had been to the district for an outdoor photography assignment and had been struck by the area’s appearance, which was still in the back of his mind when he went there to film. (Zhang 2005) He spent more than two years filming in three factories that had all slowly begun to decline as a result of the rapidly changing economy and industrial structure in China. The film he
finally produced, *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi Qu*), is a nine hour long, three-part documentary. It premiered in 2004 at the International Film Festival of Berlin, where it was immediately acclaimed by critics, garnering a number of awards.

In approaching *West of the Tracks*, Wang Bing has stated that he “didn’t set out an approach to the technical side of the filmmaking ahead of time. I hadn’t looked for any rational filmmaking strategy…I started thinking about how I could take a more structured approach for what I wanted to work on next, which was the life of the older generation.” (Köhler 2007) Wang Bing had originally planned to make a film about the lives of Chinese intellectuals of the previous generation, and he had conducted some preliminary research beginning in 2004. During the course of this research he met an elderly woman named He Fengming and came to know her relatively well, but he still had no particular plans in terms of his next film. However, in 2005 he was contacted by the Kunsten Art Festival in Brussels to contribute some work to their program of films. (Köhler 2007) While trying to figure out what he could contribute, Wang Bing realized that he could make a film about He Fengming. In January 2006 he filmed her speaking about her life, ultimately making a film that was a little over two hours long. The film was shown at the Kunsten festival in May 2006, but Wang Bing was not satisfied with the product, so he went back to visit He Fengming to film more of her story. This last filming session resulted in a final product that was a little over three hours long, completed in September 2006. (Köhler 2007)

Since the completion of *He Fengming* Wang Bing has continued to make films, including the 2007 *Brutality Factory* (*Canren gongchang*), which was made as a contribution to *The State of the World*, a group of short films collected by the Portuguese
filmmaker Pedro Costa. I have not yet seen the film but *Brutality Factory*, which was apparently filmed in the ruins of a factory, is said to have used actors to reenact a violent political struggle session that took place during the Cultural Revolution. Wang Bing’s newest film is *Crude Oil* (*Caiyou riji*), a documentary about oil field workers in Inner Mongolia. (See Appendix 2 for a selected filmography)

4.2.5 Wang Bing’s *He Fengming*

Wang Bing’s 2006 documentary ‘*Fengming: A Chinese Memoir*’ (*He Fengming*) stands in stark contrast to Hu Jie’s relatively conventionally structured documentaries, which involve secondary eyewitness accounts, extensive editing and supporting visual documentation. *He Fengming* is a three-hour long film narrated by He Fengming, an elderly woman who suffered through both the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late 1950s, losing her husband in the process, and through the Cultural Revolution (See Figure 19). Unlike *Though I Am Gone*, which is centered around Wang Jingyao’s visual documentation of an atrocity or *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao*, *He Fengming* is not interested in secondary documentation or in providing historical context for the viewer. *He Fengming* is focused only on documenting one woman’s voice and story, and it accepts her personal version of history without demanding external proof from photographs or eyewitnesses. The movie gives the viewer the impression that it was filmed in a single, day-long take, and it consists almost entirely of one shot: Fengming sitting in her chair and talking to the filmmaker/viewer.¹⁷ The narrative is interrupted

¹⁷ The film was actually made over three sittings, with the final session separated from the first two by nearly nine months. The first two sittings resulted in a two hour-long film that premiered in May 2006 at the Kunsten film festival in Brussels. Wang Bing was not
only when Fengming has to stop to answer the telephone, or to go to the washroom, during which the camera keeps filming her empty chair. There are no secondary visuals, such as family photographs or official documents, nor are there interviews with other eyewitnesses. Wang Bing’s choice to focus only on this elderly woman speaking, seated in her living room, at once narrows the viewer’s focus, and highlights the mundane loneliness of her present existence.

*He Fengming* opens on a cold, snowy evening with the camera following Fengming from behind in an extended take as she trudges the streets to an as yet unknown destination. The opening establishes that Fengming is both the subject of the film and the person in control of the narrative, demonstrated by the fact that the viewer is literally following her path. After she arrives in a dark doorway, the shot changes, remaining for the next 180 minutes on Fengming in her living room chair. This perspective places the viewer in the position of respectful listener and guest of Fengming. The shot is wide enough that the viewer can see some of the living room and some of the objects therein, including a bag of oranges on the table. Her flat seems rather small and not very well-lit. All of this functions to give the viewer a sense of Fengming’s present circumstances.

Fengming tells us that she was a young woman planning to attend Lanzhou University when, in 1948, the Communist Party came to power. Excited by the new political and social order, she decided to forgo school and begin working. She got a job as a journalist at the Gansu Daily. Fengming and her husband Wang Jingchao, who also worked for the newspaper, were largely supportive of the Communist Party. For several years, Fengming’s life seems to have been relatively smooth: she gave birth to two satisfied with the product, so in September 2006 he returned to film one more session with He Fengming. (Köhler 2007)
children, and in 1957 was even given the honor of being sent to Beijing to report on an agricultural show. Not long before that, however, Fengming’s husband, encouraged by his superiors at the paper (who presumably were themselves encouraged by Mao’s Hundred Flowers Campaign), composed an essay criticizing some of the problems with the party bureaucracy. Wang Jingchao also wrote two other essays that were not well-received by the party cadres in the area. Not long afterwards the Anti-Rightist Campaign began, and Wang Jingchao was branded a rightist. He became a major target of the campaigners and Fengming, being his wife, was automatically guilty by association. Both of them were subjected to struggle sessions in which they were criticized and denounced. They were kept apart from one another and from their children. The critiques lasted for months and were particularly brutal for Wang Jingchao. In one sad and disturbing moment Fengming recalls being allowed to go home to see her husband, whereupon he wept in her arms – the first time she had ever seen him cry. Fengming was also deeply affected by these experiences, at one point unsuccessfully attempting to commit suicide by taking pills.

In April 1958, after months of this treatment, Fengming and her husband were sent to separate camps in order to undergo ideological reform through labour. They had to leave their children and their lives in Gansu behind. Fengming suffered in the camp from overwork and near-starvation. She said she was often extremely hungry, but pointed out that she was fortunate because some of the women who lived with her were on the work team that ground grain into flour and would steal handfuls for everyone to eat. Fengming corresponded with her husband, but with decreasing frequency as her life in the camp became more and more focused simply on survival. In 1960 she received a letter from
him that obliquely indicated he was dying of starvation. After several failed attempts to obtain permission to leave the camp to go to her husband, Fengming was finally allowed to go. She collected some food and walked in the snow for miles before reaching her husband’s camp. Once there, however, she found she was too late; her husband was already dead. Devastated with grief, she was forced to spend the night in a cave with two strangers. The strangers, two men, tried to comfort her and offered her extra blankets to keep warm. Adding to her horror, Fengming realized that these blankets must have once belonged to labour camp prisoners who had probably already starved to death. Although Fengming asked to see her husband’s grave, the camp personnel made excuses and did not allow it. She was forced to leave without any closure.

Following these tragedies, Fengming and her children were pushed to the edges of society; they were tainted by her politically unfavorable past. Although she was partially rehabilitated in 1961 and allowed to return to working for the Gansu Daily, she suffered similar tragedies all over again when the Cultural Revolution began in the late 1960s. Fengming does not recount her Cultural Revolution experiences in as much detail as her experiences from the Anti-Rightist Campaign, but she was apparently not fully rehabilitated by the state until 1979.

Near the end of the film Fengming discusses her continued desire to find her husband’s grave. In 1991 she and her son returned to the site of his labour camp. They were accompanied by someone who claimed that the graves had been marked by stones painted with the names of the dead. By the time Fengming arrived, however, the names on the stones had worn away, preventing her from ever knowing exactly where her husband was buried. Perhaps in an effort to avoid a similar erasure of her story by time,
Fengming published a book about her experiences during the Anti-Rightist Campaign called *My Life in 1957* (*Jingli – wode 1957 nian*).  

*He Fengming* closes by changing to an entirely different shot – the camera is positioned outside of what appears to be Fengming’s bedroom. Fengming is inside, speaking with another labour camp survivor on the telephone. According to Wang Bing, this person just happened to call while he was filming. (Köhler 2007) In a sense, this development shakes the viewer out of the trance-like state instilled by the image of Fengming sitting alone for most of the film’s 184 minutes, breaking some of the loneliness that pervades her story’s past and present. The phone call demonstrates that Fengming is part of a network of people who lived through difficult historical periods and whose stories remain generally submerged and unknown in the present.

While Fengming’s story has been largely unedited by Wang Bing, it is certain that she has often reviewed her memories and they have been partially shaped with the passage of time and through the writing of her own memoir. It seems that she has told her story many times before; she speaks succinctly and clearly without any need for prompting. She remains relatively unemotional when telling her story, including the story of her husband’s death. It is only when she begins recounting later events in her life - such as attempting to find her husband’s grave but finding only stone markers with names faded to nothing, an event not covered in her book - that she shows raw emotion. It may be that in writing out her earlier experiences Fengming managed to compartmentalize some of her pain within the literary structure of her writings, creating literary distance between herself and her memories, a distance not yet possible for her more recent

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18 The book was published in 2001 by the *Dunhuang wenyi chubanshe* but the film seems to indicate that it was written in the late 1980s.
memories. Primo Levi, when writing about the fallibility of human memory, has noted that repeatedly evoking raw memory as a fixed story, can eventually result in it being overtaken by a perfected and crystallized narrative. (Levi 1989: 24) Fengming’s pain demonstrates the lasting effect of trauma, particularly of undigested and unexamined trauma. Her history, symbolized and underlined by her husband’s unmarked grave, has been consigned to an unacknowledged, unexamined domain of China’s collective past. This aspect of the film was most moving for me, demonstrating the impact on individuals of large, abstract political movements. Such impacts are often erased when history is described in large strokes. The bare, simple style of filming effectively conveys to the viewer how Fengming’s life has been stripped to the bone.

Wang Bing attempts to present Fengming’s story in an unmediated manner, allowing each audience member to construct his or her own visual narrative of events as recounted by the subject. In this regard, Wang Bing has stated that, “I’m concerned that I don’t impose a message, as I don’t want to visually force anything on viewers…to make it as loose and open as possible…to maximize the possibilities of the audience directly experiencing and following her [Fengming’s] story.” He continues, “There should be nothing standing in the way, least of all the director, as a screen between the subject and the audience.” (Köhler 2007) Thus, Wang wishes to give the viewer the experience of being a guest who has been given the privilege of listening to Fengming and who is free to interpret her story as he or she sees fit.

To attempt to present an unmediated personal narrative is perhaps a deliberate response to the problems Wang Bing sees in the heavily mediated historical narratives that he was taught in school. Wang has stated that one motivation for the making of the
film was to break through such official historical narratives because “the education my generation received didn’t reflect reality. Suddenly as we entered our 30s…we began to realize this discrepancy between what we’ve been taught and the truth…we’ve been living in unreality.” (Köhler 2007) Another closely related motivation was to encourage Chinese people to overcome their reluctance to reflect on historical events because, “if you don’t look back on your history, it seems to me that you can’t observe clearly which way you should be headed in the future.” (Köhler 2007) The result of a refusal to look back on the past is a society suspended in a kind of “empty space, detached in a kind of illusion, without any grounding,” creating, “an uneasy feeling, a psychological discomfort…that’s hard to describe.” (Köhler 2007) Wang Bing’s motivation for making this film, then, seems very similar to that of Hu Jie in making In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao and Though I Am Gone.

Of course, an entirely unmediated film is an impossible thing to achieve. Fengming’s story has been mediated, not only through her memory, but also through Wang Bing as a director – he chose where to film Fengming and he framed the shot. This he did over a period of nine months, even though the appearance is of a one-time shoot. Wang Bing also edited the film, although very minimally – it seems he sometimes skips parts of Fengming’s story (perhaps if she went off-topic) by using brief fades to black – a conscious choice that creates a distinctive narrative style. Films are inevitably mediated in other ways as well, through both film festival program descriptions and by the perceptions of individual audience members, who see them and interpret them in vastly different ways. Like Hu Jie’s films, He Fengming has not been officially screened in Mainland China. The film has been screened at film festivals all over the world, including
Vancouver and Hong Kong. The odd current reality is that many Mainland Chinese filmmakers make films that, though intended for Mainland audiences, are largely seen only by foreigners. By denying such films official approval and distribution, the state silences or at least severely limits the voices of survivors and filmmakers who wish to engender awareness and discussion in mainland China.

In reviews, Wang’s choice of structure is considered either an innovation or a hindrance to positive reception for the film. The film expects the viewer to enter the theatre at least somewhat familiar with recent Chinese history, and provides no historical background or outside sources. It relies entirely on Fengming and on what she chooses to describe. The length and frequent use of static shots makes the story very intense, but also challenging to view. The Vancouver screening at which I first saw the film was attended by a number of older Chinese audience members, many of whom either left early or slept through it. The quiet, single-shot form presents Fengming in a respectful way and allows her to narrate her own story, but one wonders whether a director has some responsibility to place the story in a larger context. The tendency of recent Chinese documentarists to make films in which they passively listen to their subjects has been criticized as a “conspicuous lack of self-confidence, so much so that they would eagerly erase themselves from the picture and depend completely on other people’s words to express their views.” In this view the filmmaker, “in an effort to reduce or eliminate authorial interference…entrusts the interviewees to speak truths and forget[s] a truism that words, like images, are not always trustworthy.” (Zhang 2004: 126; italics in the original) While it is likely that Wang Bing’s choice of structure is, in part, an attempt to reduce authorial interference, it is also possible that the lack of a larger narrative in He
*Fengming* is connected to Pickowicz’s observation that in many Chinese films, “moving beyond private spaces and locating the problems of the individual in a larger political or social context rarely occurs,” because that might require holding the party or the state directly responsible. (Pickowicz 2006: 15)

One interviewer stated that he felt the making of *He Fengming* was a brave and political act. (Köhler 2007) Wang disagreed and denied that it was a political gesture, saying that any political impact would not be because of the film but because of the political situation at that particular time. (Köhler 2007) It is likely that Wang’s reluctance to label his filmmaking as something connected to politics is at least partially related to the inherent difficulties of ‘independent’ filmmaking in China today. As has already been discussed, documentary filmmaking in some ways allows filmmakers more flexibility in that it is impossible for a script to be submitted for approval before shooting begins, obviating the need for official approval. (Berry 2007: 126) Change in China is so rapid that filmmakers must work quickly to gather their footage and release their films. This is in sharp contrast to the relatively slower process of making feature films. (Köhler 2007) However, filmmakers wishing to have their films officially distributed and shown in China are dependent upon state-controlled venues. (Berry 2007: 131) Thus, the range of acceptable topics is necessarily limited by current politics. It must also be said that the sharply restricted circulation of documentary films is partially market-related, especially in Wang’s case because his films are so long. Still, it seems likely that Wang’s decision to avoid describing the film as a political statement is prompted in part by a desire to avoid being seen as a filmmaker who is opposed to the present CCP government and its official historical narratives.
Another interpretation of Wang Bing’s long takes can be found in the work of Svetlana Boym (2001) and Jie Li (2007). In her examination of nostalgia in Chinese film, Li makes use of Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgias. Using this framework, Li sees the films of the Fifth Generation filmmakers Zhang Yimou and Cheng Kaige as examples of a restorative nostalgia that seeks to evoke a “national past and future [and] to reconstruct bygone times and lost civilizations with collective emblems and rituals.” In such films the past is, “not a duration, but a perfect snapshot.” In contrast, Li sees the films of the younger directors Jiang Wen and Jia Zhangke as examples of a reflective nostalgia that is about individual memory and the “imperfect process of remembrance.” She argues that the newer films examine larger historical moments from particular, local perspectives. In discussing the techniques used by Jia Zhangke she notes that he often uses long takes because they “preserve and contemplate…the passage of time.” (Li 2007) The same can be said of Wang Bing’s decision to use extremely long takes when shooting He Fengming. He appears to be echoing the techniques of other filmmakers examining the impact of historical events on individuals. He Fengming, while not fictional, is thus an example of reflective nostalgia in that it examines the life of one individual in great detail, emphasizing how much her present life is tied to past traumas and allowing the viewer ample space to contemplate her narrative. Wang has stated that he views Fengming as someone who is “actually living in the past to a real degree…her living in this tomb space is a bit like a ghost sitting down or moving about.” (Köhler 2007) Fengming is someone whose historical experiences have been marginalized and forgotten or ignored by the world around her.
The “focus here is not on recovering what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on history and the passage of time.” (Svetlana Boym quoted in Li 2007)

In He Fengming, individual experience and memory are given primary importance by the deliberate rejection of the techniques used in official narratives, which present history as black and white and as definitive ‘truth.’ Li comments, in her discussion of a scene in Jia Zhangke’s Platform, where two characters discuss an unseen execution, that the avoidance of visual representations of traumatic events (such as executions or, in He Fengming, photographs from the time period) may be interpreted as a “reluctance to participate in the mass spectacle of state violence…in many ways more realistic than the dramatic brilliance of direct witness.” (Li 2007) Fengming’s story is hers alone to tell, and Wang Bing attempts to enable her telling with as little interference as possible and without any sensationalism. The attempt to strip the film of any potential influence from outside mediation represents a choice that could be interpreted in two ways: (1) as a distinct counternarrative to official histories, or (2) as an abrogation of the director’s voice, representing a bending to the will of the state through self-censorship.
5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Filmmaking Approaches: Hu Jie and Wang Bing

Time and its passage are emphasized in both Wang and Hu Jie’s films, but in rather different ways. In *Though I Am Gone*, Hu Jie’s shots of a ticking clock, of an old camera used to document trauma, and of archival footage, all function to demonstrate that although time passes and varied stories are told or not told, memories and photographs remain as important testaments. Hu Jie’s films present personal histories backed up with all available evidence as part of an effort to illuminate wider historical contexts and to hint at the untold stories. *Though I Am Gone* memorializes and commemorates more than just Bian Zhongyun’s story, particularly by respectfully listing the names of other victims of the Cultural Revolution. *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* achieves something similar through interviews with many elderly people, the vast majority of whom have tragic stories to tell.

Wang takes a very different approach, emphasizing the passage of time by stripping his film down, intensely focusing on the subjective memories and perceptions of one person. This suggests that unofficial but very real and powerful history consists largely of individual, subjective memories that remain long after events have passed. However, by including the final shot of Fengming on the telephone with a fellow labour camp survivor, Wang also demonstrates that many more people suffered similar tragedies, but they remain unnamed and unknown.

In looking at the distinctions between Hu and Wang and their approaches to documentary-making I would like to conclude by discussing my views on the following question: Do their films succeed both aesthetically and as critiques of engrained historical
narrative?

In terms of aesthetics, Hu Jie’s approach, in my view, is more appealing but, if art is defined as the creation of a beautiful or significant thing, then both filmmakers have succeeded. Still, Hu Jie’s films, *Though I Am Gone* in particular, are incredibly well-structured and moving; they clearly communicate the subject matter but are also engrossing and visually appealing films. *He Fengming*, on the other hand, while a respectful portrait of an elderly woman recounting her life, is more like raw data and it is at times a challenge to stay focused on her story for three hours. Wang Bing may have wanted to avoid including anything that could be interpreted as an exploitation of her grief, but if he had provided her story more context, by showing a photograph of her husband or of her children, he would have added to the poignancy of her story and the film would have been more visually variable and engrossing.

The three documentaries examined in this thesis all represent interesting and important steps in Chinese independent filmmaking and in independent history-telling, but I also suspect that the approach taken by each director provides an indication of how much they are individually willing to risk. While Hu Jie openly takes ownership of his films, narrating, editing and boldly including his own opinions, Wang makes every possible effort to avoid directorial interference and the expression of his own opinion. His attempt to find truth purely through observational filmmaking, though a valid approach, in my opinion, may also have some genesis in a desire to avoid accusations that he is playing politics. By avoiding larger political or historical contexts, his film is much more indirect than Hu Jie’s in terms of criticizing mainstream narratives. I cannot say with certainty that avoidance of political ramifications is the reason Wang chose his
observational style of filmmaking, particularly since he was already closely associated with the style in his previous work, *West of the Tracks*, which was a three part observational documentary. In addition, while it is easy for me to state that Wang could have improved his film by using a different narrative structure, I am not Chinese and I can never completely appreciate what is at stake in such a situation. Nonetheless, by not providing a wider context for his film, I think that Wang’s approach is less effective and assertive as a challenge to ingrained historical narrative.

In contrast, Hu’s approach is undoubtedly braver and riskier, because he uses his films to personally invoke his own opinions. Hu Jie’s films require not only conducting and filming of multiple interviews across the country, but also the intensive gathering of archival footage and documentation, all of which must then be edited down into a final film. The complexity and depth of information gathered indicates that Hu inevitably invested far more time and effort into the completion of even one of his films than Wang was required to invest in Fengming. As I learned when I met and interviewed him, Hu is a multi talented artist and truth seeker (his beautiful paintings alone attest to that fact) who is driven by a desire not only to create art but, very importantly for him, to document a diverse picture of China’s memoryscape before it is irrevocably altered by the loss of older generations.

### 5.2 Why Now?

The subjects interviewed in the films of Hu and Wang are undoubtedly brave. They have taken a risk by choosing to participate in the documentaries. Viewers are thus inevitably led to wonder why they were willing to appear in the films?

It is important to note that the people in these films represent a tiny minority of the
total number of people who suffered through the historical periods examined in the documentaries. Indeed, in Though I Am Gone, a key witness to the events of Bian Zhongyun’s death refused to participate, stating that the time was still not right. Hu Jie often cannot convince people to participate in his films, either because they decline, or because their family members convince them not to. (Pan 2008: 79) Thus, there are many more people with untold stories and memories than there are brave public speakers. The subject matter of the three films examined in this thesis is not popular, even in the world of Chinese independent film. It would be inaccurate to view these films as part of a trend of memory-telling among elderly people in China. Indeed, the impatient attitude towards history, as demonstrated by Xiao Zhao, the young independent poet at the Hu Jie screening I attended indicates a generational gap that precludes discussion of such events. Still, the question remains, what motivated the participants in these films to tell their stories now?

While it is impossible to answer the above question definitively, there are a number of factors that may be playing a role. First, in Chinese society more particularly than in many other societies, many people feel that the past is not something that should be discussed; this ingrained belief or social rule leads to an unwillingness or an inability on the part of the public to listen to personal pain. Coupled with the difficulties universally inherent in individual verbal expression of physical or emotional pain, this socially ingrained expectation of silence often results in silence. (Caruth 1996: 8) Participation in public discourse can be a challenge in China when “one’s voice and identity still suffer from past trauma,” but also because mainstream culture and official discourse disregard and disallow discussion of specific painful historical periods. (Braester 2003: 147) The
interviewees in Hu and Wang’s films, having been approached with empathy and an actual interest in hearing and conveying their stories, must have been powerfully motivated to overcome initial misgivings and participate. Having suffered the inevitable physical and emotional consequences of lifetimes of silence, the interviewees, probably even more than the filmmakers, must have dealt throughout their lives with some kind of archival impulse that would fight against allowing their powerful stories to die with them.

Second, the time between the traumatic events examined in the documentaries and the actual narration of their stories is significant. The subjects in the films have had decades to distance themselves from the actual events; that is not to say that the urgency of their stories has lessened with time, but the subjects have had years to think about and try to deal with them. Since each of the three documentaries revolve around the death of a family member or friend, the emotion with which the interviewees speak demonstrates “the inextricability of the story of one’s life from the story of a death,” making them all historical witnesses. (Caruth 1996: 8) The interviewees may have been burdened for years with the guilt of having survived the tumultuous times that their friends or family members did not, and sharing their stories may have been one way to unburden themselves. It is also possible that many of them previously did not tell their stories because they felt that the risk was too great, or that it was not possible to be truthful, but now, given their advancing age, they perhaps felt if they didn’t tell their stories now, they never would. After all these years of silence, perhaps speaking with a sympathetic younger person was therapeutic in a way it had never been before.

5.3 Official versus Unofficial Visual Discourse

I have discussed very distinct forms of narrative: comic strips, feature films and
documentaries. All are connected through their use of the visual form. I am aware that the narratives examined cover a very broad space of time; however, the official narrative recounted in the San-yuan-li comic continues to be propagated through the contemporary form of a museum. Official visual discourse continues to preclude unofficial visual discourse from challenging the established order. The official narratives I have examined are connected through their portrayal of traumatic historical events as redemptive lessons. Individuals play a role only insofar as they are ‘models’ for the rest of the citizenry, but these models are not portrayed as complex, multi-dimensional and contradictory human beings. The nation-state is generally paramount, and official narratives function largely in a didactic manner – illustrating for the people a version of history that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the CCP.

In contrast, the unofficial narratives presented in the documentaries of Hu Jie and Wang Bing recount extremely traumatic events on the level of individual suffering – they personalize the events. Hu Jie’s films in particular attempt to connect such traumas to the larger issues of collective memory and memorialization. These films do not glorify trauma – it is shown to be something that scars not only its direct victims for the rest of their lives but that detracts from all of us by the avoidance of truths that could and should enlighten us – nor do they imply that the experiences of the film’s subjects were necessarily redemptive. The subjects of these films do not seem to be seeking catharsis, but are instead seeking to testify to their own personal histories. Their goals appear, in part, to be to obtain recognition and perhaps redress through their testimonies. The fact that their experiences are simply forgotten or absent in contemporary Chinese discourse is a marker of how far they are from such aims. Hu Jie and Wang Bing have created films
that function as voices calling for a change in this status quo.

The three documentaries examined in this thesis tell tragic stories, and the stories they tell are only three among hundreds of thousands of untold stories. The fact that so many stories remain untold highlights the gaps in official historical narrative and, for viewers of the films, these gaps are impossible to ignore. They become even more evident when compared to the rigidity of official visual discourse, which purports to tell truth but generally leaves no room for inquiry or interpretation. Thus, the strength of Hu and Wang’s documentaries is the space they have created for a small number of people to confront their own individual wounds, demonstrating “the profound link between the death of [a] loved one and the ongoing life of the survivor.” (Caruth 1996: 8) By being among a very small number of filmmakers producing work that examines and documents personal histories, Hu (and Wang, to a lesser extent) is challenging dominant visual discourse and creating an archive for the future.

5.4 The Future of Independent Film in China

In this thesis I have, in part, attempted to provide some insight into how Chinese people access unofficial narratives when the official versions are often, at least in public forums, given so much more prominence. Although new technologies make it somewhat easier for individuals to film and distribute their own versions of history, \(^{19}\) the CCP still attempts to control what is available for the consumption of its citizens. Until that situation changes it will not be possible to discuss official and unofficial narratives as equal contributors to the collective memory of Mainland China. Thus, it is reasonable to

\(^{19}\) Here I am thinking about technologies such as internet forums, bittorrent and other file-sharing websites, video-sharing websites such as Youku and Tudou, personal recording devices and so on.
ask: What are the prospects for the future development of independent documentary filmmaking in Mainland China?

Small independent film festivals being held in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are, in my view, the most interesting, promising and diverse venues for the distribution of independent film. They are places where filmmakers can gather once or twice a year and easily swap DVDs of their work, and plan for future gatherings. Taking the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) as an example, the festival organizers in Songzhuang are involved in constant negotiation with local officials in order to be permitted to go forward with their event. In certain cases, open-minded local officials can be protective of artists and film festivals and allow them to screen more sensitive films, but there are always political constraints beyond the control of local officials, which also limits how many risks such film festivals can take. ("Di wu jie" 2007: 2)

The BIFF and the Li Xianting Film Fund are new and important players in the independent film world in China, and they are also closely connected to Fanhall Films, a film website that has branched into distribution and film production. The Fanhall films website is a place where people can discuss screenings, foreign and domestic films, and upcoming festivals. I do not know how freely the website members can discuss sensitive topics, however, on December 30th, 2009, the website was shut down for approximately three weeks, possibly to limit discussion of Zhao Liang’s 2009 film Petition (Shang Fang).²⁰

²⁰ As of March 2010, the description of Petition no longer seems to be available on the website, indicating that it may indeed have been the reason for the website’s temporary shutdown. This information was obtained from an email written by Lu Chen that was sent to Modern Chinese Literature and Culture (MCLC) mailing list members on January 17th, 2010.
Recent years have seen the establishment of an independent film archive as well as an exhibit in Beijing’s 798 Art District on independent film in China, which is significant for a few reasons. For one, there is obviously an appetite for Chinese independent film, both in and outside of China – although what subject matter is covered and how sensitive it is tends to be highly variable. Permitting a public exhibition in Beijing demonstrates an openness on the part of at least some authorities. However, the fact that such exhibits are taking place in 798, a popular tourist destination, also indicates independent film in China is becoming more commercialized. As I discussed in Chapter 3, many filmmakers market their work abroad, which can lead to the creation of art that is sensational, but not necessarily sensitive. It can also lead to stagnation in creativity as everyone attempts to make films that fit what they believe Western audiences want. Certain Chinese filmmakers do hope to use foreign film festivals in order to encourage “the state to pay attention to them and later provide them with opportunities to make expensive aboveground movies.” (Pickowicz 2006: 10) I do not feel that Hu Jie or Wang Bing are in this category. Hu Jie, in particular, works hard to avoid being seen as a tool of foreign interests and refuses to accept foreign funding for his projects. Thus, while commercialization is not necessarily a negative thing, it remains to be seen what its impact will be on independent filmmaking in China.

At present, independent filmmakers who tackle sensitive subjects are guaranteed that they will have no access to domestic distribution channels. This means that, even if their films are popular and are distributed hand-to-hand throughout the country, the filmmakers have little chance of ever making a profit. This makes it difficult to attract domestic financial support for sensitive projects – I expect that Hu Jie, after having
established himself through many smaller films, has some domestic benefactors who provide some financial support for his projects, but this is pure speculation. The risk and lack of profitability involved in making politically sensitive films means that only a small minority of brave independent directors decide to choose such topics.

For filmmakers unwilling to take such risks, they must choose topics that are not overly sensitive and that must cooperate with state-run distribution companies. In a recent interview, when asked about how his recent films are distributed, Jia Zhangke stated:

In terms of distribution, generally speaking, we go through state-owned companies, in particular those film groups with whom we’ve had long-term relationships and previously cooperated, such as the Shanghai Film Group. Why do we have to find a state-owned distributor? It’s like I’ve said, the distribution channels are still controlled by state-owned companies. They’ve got the right to speak. I really hope that when these young directors [referring to new independent filmmakers] finish their films they can secure distribution and get circulated. But since the distribution channels are the way they are, I think that cooperation is the best way to go. Through cooperation we can ensure the work of these young directors can enter the movie theater lineups. ("Jing Daily" 2010b)

This statement demonstrates the current obstacles to a fuller development and distribution of independent film in China today. While there is certainly a great deal of interesting work being produced, and while I found the atmosphere and excitement of participants in the BiFF very encouraging, unless state-run distribution channels become more receptive to independent and alternative views, filmmakers like Hu Jie and Wang Bing will continue to be denied audiences and profits. The courage and compassion
exhibited in their films, both by the filmmakers and by the brave subjects in the films, deserves to be seen and appreciated by more Chinese people.
6 ANNOTATED TRANSLATIONS

6.1 In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao

Directed by Hu Jie

Part 1 on Youtube

Hu Jie: Four years ago I first heard about a young Beijing university student who had been imprisoned in Shanghai’s Tilanqiao prison. While there, she used her own blood to compose a great deal of passionate writing, but in the end the prison had her secretly executed by gunfire. This student’s name was Lin Zhao. After the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign began, all of Mainland China stopped thinking. Life became caught between lies and fear. This situation made Lin Zhao begin to think for herself. While in jail she was deprived of pen and paper. So she used a hairpin to poke her fingers and used the blood to write. On the walls and on her shirt, she wrote essays as well as ten poems. This story led me to make the decision to quit my job in order to set out in search of Lin Zhao’s floating soul.

Title: In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao

Ni Jingxiong, Lin Zhao’s classmate from Sunan College of Journalism: We went to speak with the jail doctor and he said that she had been taken from her hospital bed. He had seen her being taken from her sickbed in order to carry out the execution order.

Hu Jie: From which hospital was she taken?

Ni Jingxiong: From the jail’s clinic. But you couldn’t even call it a hospital, it was just a place for sick people to stay. It seems that Lin Zhao had tuberculosis (TB), so she was apparently staying in the pulmonary TB ward.

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21 There is a Chinese transcript of this film available online (“Xunzhao” n.d.), but it is not identical to the version found on Youtube. (“Jilupian” 2006) I have therefore attempted to note and describe places where the versions differ significantly.

22 Because the easiest place to find a copy of this film is on Youtube, I have divided my translation so that it corresponds to the way in which it is divided up on Youtube. (“Jilupian” 2006)

23 In this translation I will put the first occurrence of any speaker, including the narrator, in bold and italics. Any subsequent appearances will only appear in italics.

24 Lin Zhao was born under the name Peng Lingzhao, although this birth name is not mentioned in the film. Lin Zhao was her pen name. (Pan 2008: 29)

25 Hu Jie had been employed at Xinhua, the official state news agency. He was given the choice of either being dishonorably fired or signing a resignation letter. (Zhai 2008; See Chapter 6.2)

26 I will italicize descriptive information, such as photograph captions, newspaper headlines, and so on.
Hu Jie: So she was taken from the hospital where she was staying?

Ni Jingxiong: She was taken from her sickbed to be executed. The doctor said he thought it happened sometime in the afternoon. As for where she was taken to be executed he said he wasn’t sure.

Hu Jie: This happened in which jail’s hospital?

Ni Jingxiong: Tilanqiao. That doctor was the Tilanqiao doctor. We had come for a private visit as friends and relatives, but we didn’t even have a letter of introduction, so the doctor was very reserved and hesitant when speaking with us.

Bus Announcement: Tilanqiao stop. Please exit through the rear door. Mind the automatic door.

Title: Shanghai Tilanqiao Prison

Report Heading: Shanghai People’s Prosecution (jiancha yuan) – Accuser: Shanghai Jail, Accused: Lin Zhao. Crime: Counterrevolution.27

Hu Jie: I saw how Lin Zhao was described in the report on her jailhouse activities. This report of ‘new crimes’ was used to increase her sentence: “The sentenced prisoner (Lin Zhao) used hairpins, bamboo toothpicks, and other objects to frequently poke herself, hundreds of times. She then used the dirty blood to write thousands of characters that were extremely counterrevolutionary in content. She has written extremely evil letters, notes and diaries. She has publicly smeared the system of socialism by saying it ‘is a fearful system which robs human beings of everything. It is bloody totalitarianism.’ She characterizes herself as someone resisting tyranny, a ‘freedom fighter’ and a ‘young rebel.’ Her attitudes towards the dictatorship of the proletariat and the various government campaigns that have been carefully and systematically implemented are evil and shameful.”

Title: Shanghai Tilanqiao Prison

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao spent eight years in the red prison cell.28 In her manuscripts she described it as follows: “While in this infernal place I have experienced the most

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27 Hu Jie was able to obtain this document through a friend who is a judicial officer. They simply went to the Shanghai prosecutor’s office and requested Lin Zhao’s case file be photocopied. The request was processed without any problems. (Pan 2008: 73-74)

28 The significance of the color red in this sentence is ambiguous. It may refer to blood or it may refer to the red that symbolizes the Communist Party. Dr. Catherine Swatek has pointed out that it may also be inspired by depictions of hell in woodblock prints frequently used in rituals. It may be intended satirically.
terrifying and bloody hells. I have experienced something more than death itself, a death a thousand times more bitter and painful.”

_Xu Juemin, Lin Zhao’s maternal 2nd cousin (tangjiu). Formerly from China’s Social Studies School, Dean of the Faculty of Literature:_ You can’t get the official archives and files. This is an absolute rule. It was a Supreme Court order. They wouldn’t allow access. The main reason for this is that much of the documentation consists of her diaries, her denunciations, and a fair number of poems and essays in which she insults Mao. The insults were very extreme, were so…We call it an “evil attack.” Her vicious attacks were so extreme they still can’t be released.

_Hu Jie:_ While in jail Lin Zhao produced a great deal of poetry. One of the poems was directed at Mao Zedong, and was titled “A blood poem inscribed on clothing,”

_In the film, the two poems are displayed side by side to facilitate comparison. I will include the original Chinese of each poem, followed by an annotated translation. The translation of Mao’s poem is not my work, but that of Du Xia. (Mao 1998: 49) I have used Du Xia’s translation as the basis for my translation of Lin Zhao’s poem._

**Mao’s Poem in Chinese:**

七律 — 人民解放军占领南京

钟山风雨起苍茫，百万雄师过大江。
虎踞龙盘今胜昔，天翻地覆慨而慷。
宜将剩勇追穷寇，不可沽名学霸王。
天若有情天亦老，人间正道是沧桑。

**Translation (Mao 1998: 49):**

_A Verse with Eight Seven Character Lines - The People’s Liberation Army Captures Nanjing (April 1949)^

Over Zhongshan swept a storm headlong,
Our mighty army, a million strong has crossed the Great River.
The City, a tiger crouching, a dragon curling, outshines its ancient glories;

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29 In April 1949, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) captured Nanjing, the seat of the Guomindang government. In order to commemorate this event, Mao composed this poem.
30 Zhongshan (Zhong Mountain) is a region in the eastern part of the city of Nanjing (Engle and Engle 1972: 80)
31 According to Engle and Engle (1972: 80), “classical writers in China had centuries ago compared the city of Nanjing to a ‘crouching tiger’ and the Zhong Mountain east of the city to a ‘curling dragon.’”
Heaven and Earth have been overturned with vehemence and magnanimity.\(^{32}\)
With power to spare we must pursue the tottering foe.
And not ape Xiang Yu, the conqueror seeking idle fame.\(^{33}\)
Were Nature sentient, she too would pass from youth to age,
But Man’s world is mutable, seas become mulberry fields.\(^{34}\)

**Lin Zhao’s Poem in Chinese:**
血诗题衣中

双龙鏖战玄间黄，冤恨兆元付大江。
蹈海鲁连今仍昔，横溯阿瞒慨当慷。
只应社稷公黎庶，哪许山河私帝王。
汗惭神州赤子血，枉言正道是沧桑。

**Translation:**
A Blood Poem Inscribed on Clothing

Two dragons battle fiercely in the dark, separated by the Yellow River.
All their hatred and all the injustice will eventually dissolve away in the Great River.\(^{35}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{32}}\) I have done my own translation of this line only in order to better highlight the connection between it and Lin Zhao’s subsequent poem. Here Mao appears to be referencing a line from Cao Cao’s (曹操) poem ‘Short Song (短歌行).’ The original line is as follows, 慨当以慷，忧思难忘, which Ding Xiang Warner translates as “My feelings stirred, I sigh deeply. Those grieving thoughts are difficult to forget.” (Warner 2003: 93) Mao admired Cao Cao, a ruler and a poet, and made reference to him in a number of his poems. (Engle and Engle 1972: 92)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{33}}\) Xiang Yu (項羽), was “the leader of a force rebelling against the Qin Dynasty in the third century B.C. Wishing to make a reputation for compassion, he did not kill his enemy Liu Bang (刘邦) after capturing him. Later Liu in turn defeated Xiang Yu, who committed suicide.” Mao had earlier written, “Make wiping out the enemy’s effective strength our main objective; do not make holding or seizing a city or place our main objective.” (Engle and Engle 1972: 80) Xiang Yu symbolizes someone who did not follow this objective.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{34}}\) Hua-Lin Nieh Engle and Paul Engle state that the last line “is apparently based on the story of an immortal woman, Ma-ku, who was young, beautiful, with hands shaped like the claws of a bird. She had three times seen the ocean dry up and turn into fields covered with mulberry trees.” (1972: 80) Thus, the image of seas turning into mulberry fields has come to represent major change in the world.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{35}}\) This line is in sharp contrast to Mao’s self-congratulatory and self-glorifying poem. It implies that there is no real value to such ‘heroic’ efforts and that in the long run Mao’s ‘heroics’ are meaningless.
Today, as in days past, there is another who wants to cross the ocean like Lu Lian.\(^{36}\)
Ah Man [Cao Cao], with a spear in hand, sees vehemence as akin to magnanimity.\(^{37}\)
For the sake of ordinary people and the state, how can you allow the mountains and lakes to become the property of a single God-King?\(^{38}\)
China is wet with shame and the blood of newborn babes.
The King’s words overturn the truths of the human world; the seas become mulberry fields.\(^{39}\)

\textit{Hu Jie}: Lin Zhao was born in December 1932 in Suzhou. For Middle school she attended Suzhou Jinghai Missionary School. She also enthusiastically participated in Communist Party activities at the time. The jail report on Lin Zhao recounts this time period as follows: “Accused: Lin Zhao, 33 years of age, a resident of Suzhou municipality. Class background: Guomindang government officials. She was previously a student at Beijing University. In 1958 she sank to the level of becoming a rightist but remained at the school for observation. In 1959, on the pretext of needing to recuperate from an illness, she returned to Shanghai and didn’t come back. She was arrested at Number 11, 159 Lane, Maoming South Road and then sentenced to 20 years in prison.”

\textit{Hu Jie}: On another page of the report, Lin Zhao’s family history and situation are discussed. “Mother is a Suzhou resident, People’s Revolutionary Party Member, a political consultative conference member (Guomindang (GMD)). She participated in the Communist Party, then later switched to the GMD. During the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) she was imprisoned along with Lin Zhao. Lin Zhao’s father was a Guomindang government official, and a counterrevolutionary. While under surveillance, he committed suicide to avoid punishment for his crimes.”

\textit{Hu Jie}: Here is some additional background on Lin Zhao’s father: Lin Zhao’s father, Peng Guoyan, went as a young man to study in England. In 1922 he was admitted to Dongnan University, where he majored in political and economic studies. In 1926 he completed his graduate thesis, “Ireland as an independent state, a comment on the constitution.” In September 1928, at the first government-run test to find a county magistrate, Peng Guoyan achieved the best score and was subsequently appointed Suzhou’s county magistrate.

\(^{36}\) Lu Lian, also know as Lu Zhonglian (魯仲連), was a historical figure from the Warring States Period. Lu said that if Qin Shihuang (秦始皇) invaded his country he would flee across the East Ocean rather than be his subject. Here Lin Zhao is comparing herself to Lu Lian by implying that she would also refuse to be an obedient subject under Mao.
\(^{37}\) Lin Zhao also references the same Cao Cao poem as Mao, but she uses his childhood name, Ah Man (阿滿), which is a much less respectful way to address him. She is criticizing and mocking Mao for admiring Cao Cao as a hero.
\(^{38}\) The God-King refers to Mao.
\(^{39}\) Lin Zhao uses the same idiom as Mao in the final line of the poem. In her version of the poem it is obvious that the consequences of such a drastic change cannot be positive.
Hu Jie: Lin Zhao’s childhood home has already been demolished to make way for the transformation of the area into a new large-scale city.

Hu Jie: What was the curriculum at your school like?

Lu Zhenhua, Lin Zhao’s middle school classmate: The curriculum was decided by the government of the time who issued outlines on teaching that ensured all school curriculum was identical. The only difference was in the teaching of English, which varied slightly. Also, at our school we had to go to the chapel every Sunday in order to pray. This was a very rigid regulation. If you didn’t believe in the church, you still had to follow the school’s rules and go to the chapel to pray.

Hu Jie: So at that time, was Lin Zhao also expected to attend?

Lu Zhenhua: Yes, everyone had to go. It was unavoidable and that’s that.

Hu Jie: This kind of formal prayer, do you think that it made any kind of long term impression on Lin Zhao?

Lu Zhenhua: I’ve never really thought about that. But I think that it really made an impression on me, because my family was Christian.

Part 2 on Youtube

Hu Jie: At this time, Lin Zhao was a secret member of the Communist Party. The young Lin Zhao’s innate literary talents had already begun to reveal themselves. She composed essays in which she lashed out at the Guomindang’s corrupt governance. She happily participated in performances organized by the Communist Party, and was on the blacklist of the Suzhou City Defense headquarters. In June 1949, she decided, against her mother’s advice, not to go to the United States to study. She broke away from her family. ⁴⁰

Photograph Caption: Lin Zhao in 1949 at Sunan College of Journalism.

Hu Jie: She was accepted at the Party-run Sunan College of Journalism.

Title: 1949

Mao Zedong, archival video: The central government of the People’s Republic of China is hereby established.

⁴⁰ According to Pan (2008: 30), three months before the Communists gained control of China, Lin Zhao ran away from her family to attend the Party-run Sunan College of Journalism. She was estranged from her parents for a number of years and Pan claims that she permanently adopted the name Lin Zhao to “distance herself from her family.”
Hu Jie: In August 1950, the students at Sunan College began to focus on the grass-roots. Thus, they went to assist with work in the countryside. Lin Zhao participated in the Land Reform movement, going deep into the Sunan countryside.

Photograph Caption: 1951 – Portrait of Ni Jingxiong and Lin Zhao

Hu Jie: During Land Reform you were sent to take back land owned by landlords and divide it up among the common people, and this process was collectively known as Land Reform, right?

Ni Jingxiong: Yes. The most important thing was to destroy the landlord’s power and prestige.41

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao wrote a letter to her friend Ni Jingxiong.

Ni Jingxiong reads: “Land reform, as everyone knows, is a key part of strengthening the motherland. Our posts are battle stations. I think it’s like this, if we don’t work hard then we’ll let down the party and the people.”

Ni Jingxiong: If a landlord was to be shot to death it could arouse a huge crowd of people. All the things that they couldn’t say in the past could now be spoken: the denunciations and accusations thoroughly destroyed the landlord’s power and prestige, and this was then followed by the division of the four kinds of property owned by landlords: the land, the cattle, surplus grain, the buildings. All of it was divided up and given to the peasants.

Photograph of a Deed: Title to farmland and house

Ni Jingxiong reading a letter from Lin Zhao: “Now I really am without any pursuits, my feelings towards my family have become quite a bit cooler. My heart contains only a red star. I know that while I’m here, he [Mao] is in Beijing or Moscow. Every time I think of him, I’m moved and excited.”

Audio clip of people chanting: “Long Live Chairman Mao”

Hu Jie: At this point in time, Lin Zhao’s feelings towards Mao were…

Ni Jingxiong: Extremely devout. She was devout in the extreme…she regarded Mao as a father.

41 The Chinese transcript has a different version of this section of the film. The transcript includes an archival news report and song lyrics that are not included in the version available on Youtube. Both relate to the Land Reform movement and laud the Party’s success. (“Xunzhao” n.d.)
Li Rui, Mao’s secretary in 1958 and, at the same time, also vice-minister of irrigation: How did the slogan “Long live Chairman Mao” come about? In 1950, we had only just come up with the idea of creating May 1st Labour Day slogans. So we needed to write slogans that could be promoted. After 1950, it became an annual custom. The ‘Long Live Chairman Mao’ slogan was among those created for May 1st, 1950 and it was Mao himself who added it.

Photograph Caption: Li Rui and Premier Zhou Enlai

Li Rui: Zhu De’s secretary was the one who disclosed this information.

Hu Jie: Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong developed the theories of Lenin and Stalin on class struggle. Across the country he encouraged political struggle and thought reform, with one movement following on the heels of another. This caused intellectuals and those from families with bad class backgrounds to feel deeply guilty. Lin Zhao wrote a letter to her friend Ni Jingxiong saying:

Ni Jingxiong reading the letter: “With regard to the problem of my family, I naively looked at the letter I recently received from my mother and father, and I felt that they had become less backwards in their views and were now much more progressive. Therefore I was certain that they were not counterrevolutionaries. But with the assistance and guidance of my comrades in the Party, I have realized that working for reactionaries is counterrevolutionary and a crime. It helps me recognize that my own political level and class awareness are still far from the Party’s standards.”

Ni Jingxiong: Sometimes when she wrote me letters she’d draw a little cat instead of writing out her name.

Lu Zhenhua: After joining the land reform group, Lin Zhao strove to join the Party. But instead she became a target of criticism. This was because she opposed the behaviour of the Group Leader of her Land Reform group. She criticized him for leaving his former wife in the countryside. She felt that ‘You Subei Cadres come to Sunan and cast away your old wives. You’re all Chen Shimei.’ After bringing up this problem she met with attacks and retaliation. The Land Reform group’s members who managed human resources singled Lin Zhao out for criticism.

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42 Here Lin Zhao is referring to the Guomindang, which her parents had supported in the past.
43 Chen Shimei is a fictional character who left his wife Qin Xianglian, parents and children behind in order to go to the capital to write the Imperial Examination. Instead of coming back for them once he obtained a government position, he pretended he was widowed and married the Emperor’s daughter. Once this ruse was discovered, Chen Shimei was sentenced to death. His name “has become synonymous with ‘a man unfaithful to his wife.’” (Yuan 2006: 97-100).


Ni Jingxiong reading a letter from Lin Zhao: “I think that I’m now stronger than I was in the past. The most obvious manifestation of this change is that I no longer cry. Since 1951 I’ve only cried three times.”

Li Maozhang, former member of the land reform group with Lin Zhao, party instructor (zhi daoyuan):\(^44\) When she spoke she didn’t mince words (buraoren).

Hu Jie: (Laughs). She didn’t mince words.

Li Maozhang: Didn’t mince words. But she also never spoke contrary to her convictions. She never did anything that was contrary to her convictions. She had extremely sharp speaking skills, but she was very reasonable and sensible.

Hu Jie: This is the place where Lin Zhao worked on land reform, Taicang Bali Village.

Villager: [Speaking to Li Maozhang] All of your rooms used to be right here. Along the sides were the wingrooms and in the middle was the central room.

Hu Jie: The land reform workers group lived in a church that was here. Now the church has been reduced to flat earth.

Li Maozhang: When was the building torn down?

Villagers: During the beating, looting and smashing of the Cultural Revolution (gao daza qiang).

Li Maozhang: At that time, the inside of the church was full of people. We pulled out our rifles and shot in the air, bang bang bang. At the sound, the pastor came out to speak with us. He said ‘You are all in violation of the Party’s guiding principles. These guiding principles say that the people have the freedom to believe in religion. You’re violating our freedom to believe.’

Villager: And what did Lin Zhao say in the end?

Li Maozhang: Lin Zhao, upon hearing the pastor say that we were violating the ‘guiding principles of the Party,’ stood up and said, ‘yes, the guiding principles of the Party do include the freedom to believe in God, but the Central Committee has issued a notice stating that during the period of land reform religious activities must halt completely.’ So in the end the pastor had to leave.

Ni Jingxiong: Here, this is her.

\(^44\) He was the Communist Party-appointed leader of the group.
Hu Jie: In 1952 Lin Zhao’s work with land reform was finished. She was assigned to work as a cadre for the Changzhou People’s Newspaper. Working there she became deeply involved with workers and wrote many articles for the newspaper.

Photograph Caption: A painting by Lin Zhao

Hu Jie: In 1954, Lin Zhao achieved the top exam result in Jiangsu and was accepted into the faculty of Chinese Literature at Beijing University. Simultaneously, she was also appointed poetry editor at Red Chamber (Hong Lou) Magazine

Zhang Ling, Lin Zhao’s classmate from Beijing University. Writer and English translator: She smiled, she had two small braids, which was a southern hairstyle. The braids of those southern girls would hang down like this to about this level. She wore a white shirt and work pants. We called them worker’s pants. Here were the straps and here she had a pocket. The quality of tailoring on Southerner’s clothing was very good. Hers were from the Shanghai fabric cutters.

Hu Jie: Teacher Zhang, wasn’t this where you four took a picture?

Photograph Caption: Lin Zhao, Zhang Ling and two other classmates (1955)

Zhang Ling: Everyone called her Sister Lin. I thought she seemed so graceful when she walked down the road. She seemed like Lin Daiyu from the novel Dream of the Red Chamber: (Zhang Ling recites from the novel) “Her appearance is elegant and still, just like the shadow of a beautiful flower in the water, her movements are like a willow branch in the breeze, tears shine in her eyes and her breath is soft.” [This is my own translation, based on the Youtube subtitles]

Photograph Caption: Picture of Lin Zhao

Man’s Voice Singing: “A soft breeze floats through the Heavens, a gentle rain falls on the ground. A light wind stirs through my hair, and makes me long for her endlessly.” [This is my own translation, based on the Youtube subtitles]

Hu Jie: This is song from the 50s that Shen Zeyi sang for Lin Zhao while wooing her on a riverbank.

Part 3 on Youtube

Hu Jie: In 1956 there was major upheaval throughout the international Communist family. In the Soviet Union, Khruschev released his secret speech criticizing Stalin. In Poland and Hungary there was an eruption of people’s uprisings lead by intellectuals. In China, the secret speech also quietly spread among intellectual circles. This moved Mao Zedong to become more vigilant and alert concerning Chinese intellectuals.

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45 The worker’s pants are overalls.
Chen Fengxiao, Former math department student at Beijing University, now a retired teacher: After the 20th Soviet Party Congress, Stalin’s brutality was exposed. At the time there was a foreign paper available at the University, called ‘Workers Daily’ which was an English publication. It published Khruschev’s secret speech in full, and at the time my English was ok so I read it, as did Ren Daxiong, an assistant teacher in the Math Department. Ren Daxiong later died in a laogai camp. So did Tao Maoxi. At that time the three of us translated the speech.

Title: 1957

Hu Jie: In light of the changing international circumstances, Mao Zedong set up a plan to draw out any snakes from their holes.

Archival Communist Party Radio Broadcast: On April 27th, the Central Party Committee released a directive to begin a rectification movement. The great masses and patriots have responded with great fervor alongside all levels of the Party system, party members and cadres who have put forward many useful criticisms and recommendations.

People’s Daily Newspaper Headline: Offer your views to Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai.

Hu Jie: Mao Zedong composed an internal directive for the Central Committee stating: “The Party newspapers should publish less positive essays. Big character posters should allow the people to resist. University professors should get people together to provide suggestions and criticisms for the Party. As far as possible, make the rightists vomit out some poison and publish it in the papers. Give lectures to students. Give the students the freedom to express their views. Lastly have the movement’s teachers, lecturers and assistants reach the students in expelling any poison. Let them speak their minds freely. They are the greatest teachers.”

Caption at the top of the screen: From The Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Volume 5, Page 432.

Li Rui: He [Mao] was only responsible for his own subjective thoughts and objectives. The things he knew and the objectives he knew. I am only concerned with this, everything else I don’t care about. Mao was this kind of person.

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46 Laogai literally means ‘reform through labour.’

47 Hu Jie is referring to Mao’s Hundred Flowers Campaign, which was “a bold invitation to intellectuals and others outside the party to criticize Communist rule and offer suggestions for improvements.” (Pan 2008: 37) The campaign eventually led to the Anti-Rightist Campaign, with Mao claiming that some people were, “using the Hundred Flowers Movement as a pretext to ‘overthrow the Communist Party and the working class, and to topple the great cause of socialism.’” (Pan 2008: 43)
Hu Jie reading Mao’s Selected Works, Volume 5, Page 437: “Some people say this is secret plotting, but we call it open plotting because the first people to be told about it were our enemies. Luring the cow demons and snakes out of their coops, is the best way to destroy them…In short, this is a war, if we don’t fight for victory, Socialism can never be established. Moreover, there would be the danger of a ‘Hungarian uprising.’”

Hu Jie: In the midst of Mao’s plot to lure the snakes out of their holes, Beijing University students Zhang Yuanxin and Shen Zeyi posted a big character poster on May 19th, 1957. On the poster they had written a poem entitled, “It’s time.” This was the prelude to the Beijing University 5.19 movement.

Shen Zeyi, professor in the literature dept. at Huzhou Normal University, former deputy editor at Beijing University’s “The Square (Guangchang)” reciting “It’s Time”: “It’s time, the youth will open their mouths to sing, Our pain and our joy written in unison on the page. No more hidden resentment, no more hidden indignation, no more hidden grief. All of the heart’s sweetness, bitterness, and spice will be stirred up and visible in the daylight. Even if criticism and censure like a violent storm rain upon our heads, Newborn grass and trees have never feared the sun’s rays. My poem is like a torch, burning down the barriers of the world. Nothing can block its brilliant rays because its tinder is 5.4.”

Zhang Yuanxun, Professor of Literature at Qufu Normal University. Former chief editor at Beijing University’s “The Square”: At that time this kind of talk was extremely amazing. There was no one else in China who spoke like that. Everyone unanimously said the Party was good. Good good good, yes yes yes. Suddenly someone says something like this, so of course people really paid attention. As a result, more and more people came to read the big character poster. In the early morning, on the second day after it was posted, we went to go check things out. The original It’s Time poster was surrounded by many new big character posters. As soon as we saw that we were of two minds. One was, “This is a really great reaction. It really is time.” The other was, “What is it time for? Is it time for us to have a counterrevolution?” These two sentences, this was how we reacted. These two perspectives were representative of the two sides of the controversy, and they began the larger debate.

Wang Jinxi, Lin Zhao’s classmate at Beijing University: When Zhang Yuanxin and Shen Zeyi hung up their big character poster, It’s Time, Lin Zhao took their side. At that time we hadn’t participated in the movement, and to be honest we didn’t agree with that poem. To bring up to the Party a suggestion or some area that could be corrected was ok, but not this kind of moody, depressing talk.

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48 The Square was a magazine published by the Hundred Flowers Society, a group established on Beijing University Campus at the beginning of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. (Pan 2008: 40)
49 Here Shen is referring to the May Fourth Movement.
Zhang Yuanxun: By the afternoon the Beijing University Campus was full of big character posters. You couldn’t even clearly count how many there were. All of the walls were covered in red paper. Those Beijing University students were really amazing. They also composed many big character posters about other problems in China.

Chen Fengxiao: The Philosophy department’s Long Yinghua put up a big character poster called, Our Courageous Proposal. They wanted to open a forum on freedom. At the time, after I saw that poster I immediately went back to the math department and me and Zhang Yingzhong, Yang Lu and Qian Ruping, us four, worked together to write our own poster called Freedom Forum Manifesto. We had several propositions, one being to abolish the Party’s role in managing the school. The talk at that time really blew up.

Hu Jie: During this period, Lin Zhao published a lecture entitled The Rule of the Party and Individual Human Conscience and at the same time she wrote poems on big character posters and participated in the debate.

Wang Jinxì: So she was quite well-known among students at the school. Our class also had Wang Guoxiang who wrote the big character poster, People With A Brain Do Not Think Like This that was singled out (dianming) in the People’s Daily. He really was a thoughtful person.

Wang Guoxiang, Professor of international economics [location unspecified], former classmate of Lin Zhao at Beijing University: I wrote the piece entitled, People With A Brain Do Not Think Like This. I felt that following Liberation, the most important problem in China was to do with personal worship. As a result of this, discussion and thought were without freedom.

Zhang Yuanxun: Tan Tianluo wrote The First Poisonous Weed, The Second Poisonous Weed. The third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth poisonous weeds, and these were collectively named the ‘Poisonous Weed Big Character Posters.’

Archival Communist Party Radio Broadcast: But there’s still a small minority of bourgeois rightists ready to seize the opportunity to attack the Communist Party and the system of Socialism. On June 8th, the People’s Daily published ‘What is this for?’ This began a country-wide struggle against the rightists.

Caption on the side: Mao Zedong’s essay

Slogan held up by parade of people: The Anti-Rightist Campaign will be carried out in the end.

50 Here Wang is referring to the problem of people worshipping Mao, a practice promoted by the Party.
Hu Jie: In the later period of the Anti-Rightist Campaign at Beijing University, Lin Zhao already knew the inside story, but during a meeting criticizing Zhang Yuanxun she nonetheless stood up on a table.

Zhang Yuanxun: All around us were party members from the Chinese Literature Department. They took turns attacking me; shouting themselves hoarse. Their words were illogical.

Chen Fengxiao: Lin Zhao and Zhang Yuanxin’s relationship wasn’t particularly warm. Although they were all from Red Chamber magazine, Lin Zhao had originally criticized Zhang Yuanxin, something about how he shouldn’t be a certain way….but when the anti-rightist criticism began, people began making more personal attacks.

Zhang Yuanxun: So Lin Zhao climbed up on the tabletop and began to speak. Soon everyone realized it was a woman standing on the table and speaking…because it was nighttime and in such a dim place you couldn’t see Lin Zhao’s face. Her voice, Lin Zhao’s speaking voice was really pleasant. Her voice was a mid-range woman’s voice, it wasn’t at all shrill, and her Suzhou-accented Mandarin made it very lovely to hear. The Southern style of speaking is very feminine. During a lull in attacking my evilness, Lin Zhao got up to speak. She said, “What kind of meeting are we holding this evening? Is it a speech or is it a struggle session? I don’t think this is a struggle session, because today we needn’t fight against anyone. Who are we fighting? Are we fighting Zhang Yuanxun? In what ways does he deserve your anger? You gentlemen who have all just spoken, I recognize you. You’re all Party Members from the Chinese Literature Department, and you’ve all had holes poked in your throats.”

See how boldly she seized the evening? Before the sound of her voice had disappeared, a foreign languages student at the back who didn’t know her said, “Who are you? What’s your name?” That silly thing resulted in Lin Zhao standing up and saying, “Who are you?” In the black you couldn’t see clearly. “What right do you have to ask me? Are you a police officer, prosecutor, or court official? Or are you a mole?” She said, “I’ll tell you, I can tell you, no problem. Wu Song killed a tiger and told everyone that it was Wu Song who killed the tiger. I, Lin Zhao, haven’t murdered anyone. I’ll tell you, my surname is Lin, a pair of trees Lin. My given name is Zhao, a knife on top of a mouth next to the sun.” She was such a brilliant literary talent, she took the characters of her name and split them apart. She said, “Today it doesn’t matter whether the knife is hanging above my mouth or above my head.”

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51 By using this expression, Lin Zhao is saying that Zhang Yuanxun’s words were so sharp that they poked them.
52 Lin Zhao literally says, ‘gongjianfa’ which refers to all facets of the Chinese criminal and legal system at the time. The gongan being the police, the jianchayuan being the prosecution, and the fayuan being the courts.
53 Wu Song is a character in the classic novel The Water Margin. He killed a tiger with his bare hands and thus became famous.
54 Lin Zhao means she doesn’t care if she is putting herself in danger by speaking out, and she expresses this by using the deconstructed pieces of her name.
don’t need to think about that. Now that I’m here, I don’t care about where the knife is dangling.”

*People’s Daily Newspaper Headline:* The struggle against the rightists is part of a struggle for the life or death of the country.

**Part 4 on Youtube:**

*Zhang Ling:* At the time, I was only a little more than 20, they said to me, you’ve been a member of the Communist Youth League for seven or eight years. You should know better. Why are you taking the side of the rightists after only seven or eight days? I was so so ashamed. After I was expelled from the party, I had nothing else, I was crying, I implored them to please not abandon me.

*Shen Zeyi:* At the time I was really quite despondent. The struggles were extremely intense.

*Zhang Ling:* I had to clearly list all of my activities with rightist classmates so that the Party, the Youth League and my leftist classmates could rescue me.

*Newspaper Headline:* The People’s Representatives warn the rightists not to split from the people.

*Zhang Ling:* I tried to make a clean break between myself and my rightist classmates. I wouldn’t even dare to say hello to them when passing on the street. I had previously received a note from Lin Zhao and I gave it to the youth league.

*Hu Jie:* What did it say?

*Zhang Ling:* It began with, “At this moment silence is better than sound.” I knew that this note and the circumstances were not very good. I had also already given the Youth League all of my diaries, the diaries I had kept since I was 12 years old, a stack this big.55

*Shen Zeyi:* The Central Committee, Chairman Mao and the party then stated that the search for rightists in the organization should stop. This is because revolution always has an ebb and flow. You can’t just keep pounding your head into a wall; you have to take a break at times.

*Essay by Shen Zeyi entitled:* “I admit my crime to the people.”

*Wang Jinxi:* We really had no way to help her. When we added up all the rightists later on and reflected back on the time when Lin Zhao was labeled a rightist, it seems like we

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55 In the Chinese transcript the film includes is a slogan that is not present in the Youtube version. The slogan is “Smash the *Square* reactionary clique.” As has already been mentioned in this transcript, the *Square* was a campus magazine. (“Xunzhao” n.d.)
didn’t have any struggle sessions for her, but that she chose to put herself in that situation.

*Hu Jie*: After the 5.19 movement, of the more than 8000 people at Beijing University, 800 were labeled rightists.

**Chen Aiwen, Lin Zhao’s classmate at Beijing University, Former Editor at the Beijing University Magazine, “The Square.”**: All of the rightists made self-criticisms. Whether Chen Fengxiao made a self-criticism I don’t know. Tan Tianluo did, I know that. Pretty much all of the rightists made a self-criticism, except Lin Zhao who resolutely did not do a self-criticism. The only one who dared to speak back in the meetings was Lin Zhao alone. Everyone told her, tell us your standpoint, she would say, ‘My viewpoint is that everyone should have equality, freedom, harmony and kindness. We shouldn’t be accusing one another like this. If you must behave like this, then go ahead and do so, but I can’t see anything good about such a society. It would definitely be awful.’ She was completely, unabashedly open about her opposition to the political life at that time. The rest of us would never have dared do the same. In any case, to deal with the struggle sessions all you had to do was quickly say a few sentences of self-criticism. Just quickly go through the ordeal and then be done with it.

*Hu Jie*: In 1957, at the beginning of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, more that 55,000 intellectuals had been labeled rightists throughout the country. This constituted more than a tenth of the country’s intellectuals. In 1957, in the fifth and sixth issues of *Red Chamber*, He Dingben wrote, “Since the anti-rightist struggle began, one editorial department after another has done the clean-up for the party youth league, expelling the school’s famous rightists, Zhang Yuanxun, Li Ren, Lin Zhao and Wang Jinping.” In an open letter (gongkai xin) to the *People’s Daily* written from her jail cell Lin Zhao wrote: “When I was young my thinking was very left-leaning, in the final analysis this was a problem of realization. My gradual awakening arose from seeing the notorious, so-called Anti-Rightist Campaign. Day-by-day I saw through the hypocritical mask to the savage face it hid. Thus, I categorically could not allow myself to be a slave of this degenerate, willing tyranny.”

*Lu Fuwei, Lin Zhao’s classmate at both Beijing University and at Sunan College of Journalism. Former student and branch secretary at Beijing University in the Literature Department. Currently a senior journalist*: Lin Zhao’s cognitive abilities, the way she saw things, she was totally frank about. During the anti-rightist period, people marked as rightists tried to speak with me but I didn’t dare say anything. She spoke with me quite a lot. About things that I had never spoken about with anyone else. She spoke a great deal, but speaking without inhibition doesn’t mean that she had some special ability. It was just common sense. Really, it was just common sense. But because we were in a low point in history, common sense was counterrevolutionary. Honestly, to have a common sense position was to be counterrevolutionary. Common sense wasn’t anything extraordinary.
Shen Zeyi: All of the anti-rightist activities had already ended and several hundred rightists had been outed. One day, by chance, I went to a small restaurant by the lake outside the school’s south gate. As soon as I opened the door I saw Lin Zhao sitting there, having breakfast. She was surrounded by Beijing University students. There was no way to speak with her. She lifted her head and glanced at me. I also glanced at her. That was how it was, a silent acknowledgment. I saw her for a moment and it was the last time I ever saw her. (Shakes head) I decided not to think of it as the last time ever, only as the last time in this lifetime.

Hu Jie: Were there any differences between that Lin Zhao and the Lin Zhao from before?

Shen Zeyi: I think she seemed even more saintly and pure than before, much more saintly and pure. She looked pale and solemn. She radiated with purity, this was because she had experienced the so-called ‘open plot’, the luring of snakes out of their holes, that kind of inner trauma.

Qian Liqun, retired teacher in the Literature Department of Beijing University: When she joined the Party she was very idealistic and imagined sacrificing everything for the benefit of the Party. She was like this, but she also had a conscience. The most fundamental thing for her was to resist slavery. Whenever she saw slavery she would resist, including guarding against her own slavery. This constituted a contradiction between her conscience and the Party’s conceptions. After the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign she fundamentally changed. Her view of the regime was entirely altered. She used to recognize the party, used to support it. Given this premise I will present my opinions: Later, she discovered that what she was confronting was not a problem with an individual; she was confronting a flawed system. So she made a complete reversal of previous ideas, she began to resist totalitarianism. This was a very important step in her emergence from the Anti-Rightist Campaign, it’s the key to understanding. Now this leap wasn’t taken by many people, so after taking it she became unlike other people.

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao, while in jail and using bloody ink wrote: “Every time I think of cruel and painful 1957, I begin to have involuntary spasms.”

Caption on the right: Lin Zhao’s jailhouse handwritten papers. The original document was written in blood, then Lin Zhao used a fountain pen to copy it out.

Hu Jie reading Lin Zhao’s writings: “Really, even if I just hear or see or mention something about that year, anything can trigger my conditioned reflex and cause severe pain. This was a dismal, sad and disappointing time full of the tears and blood of China’s intellectuals and youth. In the past, before this tyrannical China came upon us, the intellectual sphere was able to have some positive influence, but since this movement it has been wiped out.”

Tan Tianrong, Qingdao University Physics Professor, former Beijing University ‘100 Flowers’ magazine creator: At Beijing University in 1958, we used a washbasin to make
Hu Jie: The 22-year-old Tan Tianrong already knew Engel’s *Dialectics of Nature* by heart. He was a student in Beijing University’s Physics Department. After being labeled a rightist, he laboured in Beijing University’s nursery with other rightists where he met and fell in love with Lin Zhao.

Tan Tianrong: She and I got along well, although our ways of thinking were very different…It wasn’t Mao Zedong’s thought that drove the course of revolution in China; on the contrary, the course of China’s revolution shaped Mao Zedong’s thoughts. Actually I laugh at myself, I was a promoter of Marx’s original doctrine-ism (*yuan jiaozhi zhuyi*). I would say, this is Marx’s original viewpoint. The viewpoint now, in my opinion, is definitely not Marx’s original viewpoint. Marx believed that economic production determined politics, determined the superstructure, determined people’s way of thinking.

Hu Jie: At a Shanghai Cadre Meeting, Mao Zedong said, “Every city has a number of rightists. These rightists want to overthrow us. We’ve begun to encircle, attack and get rid of the rightists and their kind.”

Hu Jie: This is a picture of Lin Zhao at Beijing University with her classmate Li Xueqin. On the back of the photograph there is a poem. Out of fear of stirring up trouble and in order to keep the photograph safe, the poem has been scribbled out. I can only make out a bit of it: “23rd October, 1957…for Xueqin…Lin Zhao”

**Part 5 on Youtube:**

Li Xueqin, Former Beijing University Physics Student: Lin Zhao, she was really so warm and enthusiastic. She really cared about people. At the time I had come from Hunan and my clothing was quite ugly and I looked like a country bumpkin. She gave me some nicer looking clothing. She knew that I loved Wang Guoxiang. He had been sent to Chadian’s “Rightist Laogai Camp” and our contact had been cut off. She found his address and gave it to me so I could send a letter. She was so clever and moreover she was very good at understanding people. But her attachments and emotions were too sensitive and passionate. When she loved, she loved to the extreme, and when she hated, she hated to the extreme. She was a person of extremes. I had a premonition then that she

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56 The four pests are: rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows. As part of the Great Leap Forward, the party had launched a campaign to rid China of all of these pests, which could involve ridiculous tasks, such as a day spent chasing down mosquitoes. It also caused major problems, including an explosion in the insect population, since there were no longer any sparrows to eat them. In turn, this caused a great deal of damage to the crops and worsened the resultant famine from 1958 to 1961. (Becker 1996: 76)
wouldn’t live long, that if she wasn’t shot that she would die of illness. At night when she couldn’t sleep, she would get up to write poems or to cry. Her classmates all knew her. She’d run by Weiming lake crying, and at night she’d cry. She disliked the Communist Party very early on. All of those poems were written with indignant blood (fen chulai de xue). We would never have written out such things, even if there was no love lost for the Party we wouldn’t write down such things.

_Hu Jie:_ But isn’t it significant that all of you were studying the Sciences?\(^57\)

_Li Xueqin:_ No, it wasn’t that. It was that I had a different relationship with the Communist Party, a little bit different. Not the same. I was born and raised in the countryside. I firmly believed that Mao Zedong represented the interests of the peasantry, but she (Lin Zhao) didn’t have that kind of feeling. She had always lived the life of an aristocrat in Shanghai. She sent her clothing to the drycleaners to be washed. Through her social circles she learned to behave like others around her (lishang wanglai). She had an autograph book and she had photographs of poets with inscriptions on the backsides, like some Russian aristocrat. Labouring people had never seen such things, but she had read every book. She really represented China’s advanced capitalist class. She didn’t accept the proletarian revolution. She didn’t accept it. No wonder she hated the situation. Implementing a proletarian revolution, that kind of an attempt, it’s bound to fail. She wanted a capitalist, absolute democracy, with freedom. By resisting she suffered a great deal of misfortune. It was obvious that this was what would happen. The Proletarian Revolution was so brutal. Several decades lost forever, so saying that she was talking about Marxism and the like, that’s not correct. She was representing China’s advanced capitalist class, but the advanced capitalist class didn’t succeed. They were unable to hold onto their power. Like Qiu Jin\(^58\), Lin Zhao was also executed. Or like Sun Zhongshan and others, who worked for China’s freedom and for democracy. For a time like now. How many people died? She was one of them. In any case, the rest of us were naive so we wavered between socialism and capitalism. We were not quite clear [what we wanted], so we survived. It was like that, you know. We weren’t as pure or as driven as her.

_Title:_ Beijing

_Gan Cui, Former Director of the Reference Room in the Department of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences._

_Trained Birds squawking:_ Hello Miss, Hello Miss. Congratulations, get rich! (Gongxi facai), Congratulations, get rich!

_Gan Cui Singing:_ “On a fiercely stormy night, I cherish your memory.

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\(^57\) Hu Jie here is probably implying that because Lin Zhao was studying the Arts she must have been more artistic and sensitive than her classmates in the Sciences.

\(^58\) Qiu Jin (1875-1907) was a young woman who led an unusually independent life as an anti-Qing revolutionary. After a failed attempt to lead an uprising against the Qing, she was captured and executed. (Spence 1990: 241)
Outside the window it’s dark and the wind howls,
Everything is soaked with rain,
But my heart has flown out in search of you.”

_title explaining the song:_ ‘Crying out (Huhuan)’ written by Lin Zhao in Beijing in 1958

_Hu Jie:_ In the later period of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, Lin Zhao wrote this piece of music. In the history of contemporary China, this is perhaps the only song left behind from the Anti-Rightist Campaign that was composed in such a different style.

_Hu Jie:_ Once Lin Zhao was labeled a rightist she wasn’t sent down to the countryside. Instead, the department head sent her to the People’s University Reference Room for reform through labour.⁵⁹ In this reference room there was another rightist who had been labeled a rightist just to fill a quota.⁶⁰ His name was Gan Cui.

_Gan Cui:_ Often we passed by one another. A man and a woman passing. People saw this and reported it. The Party committee came to speak with me. They said, ‘You two rightists can’t have a love affair.’ What they called a love affair the two of us had never…using today’s words we’d call it “an arranged love affair (Jianli lian’ai guanxi)” It was the Party that set us up. At the start we didn’t have this kind of relationship, but as soon as they said that we did, then it became a real affair. Once it was forbidden, we had a love affair. My disposition and her disposition…the more you stop us the more we’ll do it. We would purposely hold hands, walk arm in arm. That time period and the present are entirely different. Men and women now can walk arm in arm. You can go see them walking on the grounds of the People’s University.

_Hu Jie:_ This is where Lin Zhao completed the two long poems, _Song of the Seagull_ and _The Torture of Prometheus_. Moreover, every Sunday she took Gan Cui to Wangfujing Church to pray. Gan Cui wasn’t even a little bit Christian, but she told him stories from the Bible.⁶¹

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⁵⁹ Pan states that the reason Lin Zhao was not sent to the countryside was because “a professor concerned about her health intervened and arranged for her to carry out her sentence…on campus instead.” (Pan 2008: 53)
⁶⁰ Because in “many places, party bosses ordered that at least 5 percent of people in each work unit be unveiled as Rightists…even people who didn’t criticize the party were punished so officials could meet their quotas.” (Pan 2008: 46) Gan Cui made the error of allowing Lin Xinling, the subject of a struggle session, to respond to the accusations being made. As a result, “when the University failed to find enough Rightists to meet the party’s quota, it accused Gan of ‘supporting and sympathizing with Lin Xinling,’ and added him to the list.” (Pan 2008: 59)
⁶¹ In the Chinese transcript a number of slogans and newspaper headlines are included here. The slogans all relate to various campaigns during the Great Leap Forward and the headlines are from the _People’s Daily_, praising the huge increase in harvests in Xinjiang and in Ningxia. Such reports were likely gross exaggerations that contributed to the tragic famines experienced during the Great Leap Forward. (“Xunzhao” n.d.; Becker 1996: 122)
Gan Cui: In those days if you wanted to get married you had to get Party approval. After getting approved you’d receive a letter of introduction that would allow you to register your marriage. When I went to get approval, you know what I was told? The Clerk of the General Party Branch said, “You two rightists, you don’t need to marry.” We had started our affair as a type of resistance when he was in charge of us. We didn’t acknowledge him and we resisted even more intensely. So of course we couldn’t marry. There was no way. He wouldn’t sign off on it.

Hu Jie: Not long after the school refused them permission to marry, Gan Cui was sent to Number 2 Labour Camp in Xinjiang where he spent 22 years in hell.

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao left Beijing for Shanghai in order to be by her ill mother’s side. During this period she became acquainted with Lanzhou University history student and rightist Zhang Chunyuan and physics student Gu Yan who had read Song of the Seagull and came from the countryside to see her particularly.

Hu Jie: At this point, Lin Zhao’s criminal report states: “Before Zhang returned to Lanzhou, Lin presented him with a book named Drafts on Modern Principles of Revisionism as well as a reactionary long poem she had composed, The Torture of Prometheus. Then Zhang and Gu both discussed the poem and brazenly discussed how to bring about peace, democracy and freedom in a socialist society. With regard to Lin’s reactionary long poem, it was published in the reactionary publication Spark (Xinghuo).

Hu Jie: At the time you published those pamphlets were you aware of the risk to your lives?

Gu Yan, Professor of the Physics Dept., Chinese Academy of Science and Technology, formerly in charge of “Spark”: Of course. The risk was crystal clear. Didn’t I tell you? He submitted writings to the magazine Red Banner (Hong qi). For a totally legal thing, you’d be given a ten-year sentence. So of course we knew [the risk].


Part 6 on Youtube:

62 It was Gan Cui who provided Hu Jie with copies of some of Lin Zhao’s jailhouse writings (he gave Hu Jie a more than 400 page letter to the People’s Daily), which he had indirectly obtained through Lin Zhao’s sister, Peng Lingfan, who had in turn secretly received them from a jailhouse official. (Pan 2008: 62-63)

63 It is unclear who is being referred to in this sentence. In the Chinese transcription it states that he is referring to an anonymous teacher (mou jiaoshi). (“Xunzhao” n.d.)

64 In the Chinese transcript there are more slogans and newspaper headlines included that are not present in the Youtube version. Again, these headlines and slogans praise the party. (“Xunzhao” n.d.)
Liu Faqing, Professor at Guangdong Youth Cadre College. Former classmate of Lin Zhao at Beijing University: In the spring of 1960 news of people dying was spreading all over my village. At the time, although I was in Gansu Li County doing physical labour, I was also still a so-called Cadre. At the beginning the monthly grain quota per person was 26 jin.\(^{65}\) That was later reduced to 24 jin, then to 22 jin and finally to 20 jin. Each month a quota of 20 jin per person.\(^{66}\) There were no vegetables. There was no food other than grain. And if there was any, it was always extremely salty. There was nothing.

*Photograph Caption:* Liu Faqing in Beijing in 1957.

*Liu Faqing:* We ate twice a day. The first meal was a cornmeal mantou\(^{67}\) that was about half the size of a fist. I was so hungry, my stomach couldn’t take it. Eventually my legs swelled up and I knew that this was edema caused by extreme starvation and it wasn’t something medication could solve.

*Hu Jie:* At that time were the districts around you also suffering from edema, and were people dying of starvation?

*Liu Faqing:* The bodies of those who had starved were everywhere. I was in a very small county. The county had 4000 people. It was surrounded by countryside. Every evening you could hear crying coming from all around. It was too pitiful and tragic. I thought I would soon be doing the same…The dying and dead were pitiful. I thought, “I come from a family of farmers. My dad died when I was eight years old and my widowed mother raised me alone. If I die what will my elderly mother do?” Everything else was meaningless, I thought only of my elderly mother….During my most difficult period, Lin Zhao sent a letter to me from Shanghai. That was in the spring of 1960. As soon as I received the letter I ripped it open. The letter was two pages long and in the bottom there was a little paper ball. The little paper ball fell to the floor. I saw it and picked it up to take a look, I smoothed it out. Huh? It was a grain ration voucher. One, two, three, four…seven grain ration tickets! Each was for 5 jin and it was valid throughout the country.\(^{68}\) I looked at these grain tickets and I wept. I was so moved. Then I began to read

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\(^{65}\) One jin is approximately equal to 500 grams.

\(^{66}\) During that time period, everything in China was distributed through a quota system, including soap, cloth, sugar and so on. (Becker 1996: 221) The grain people could obtain through the quota was often low quality cornmeal or sorghum, not white flour. (Becker 1996: 223-224)

\(^{67}\) A steamed, plain bun.

\(^{68}\) There were provincial level ration tickets and then there were country-wide tickets, which were much more highly prized and which became a kind of alternative currency. It was possible to save up your provincial level tickets and then exchange them for the country-wide tickets. (Becker 1996: 222) Becker states that, at least initially, “Shanghai seems to have had a better supply of food even than the capital, Beijing,” which might help to explain how Lin Zhao was able to spare the ration tickets she sent to Liu. (Becker 1996: 224)
the letter itself. The letter said, “The main idea is this, I know that you’re experiencing some difficult circumstances. I am too, but I’m thin and I don’t need to eat much so I’m sending you all the grain tickets I’ve saved up over time….So seeing Lin Zhao (her letter) at that time made me weep. I wrote back to her and of course I was extremely grateful and thankful. And of course in the letter I wrote “I hope you can correctly reform yourself so that soon enough you’ll no longer have to wear the rightist hat and you can return into the arms of the people.” She wrote back and the last sentence was written in classical Chinese: “For me and you, whose feet are in the same boat, we can only reach the land if the boat nears the shore.”\textsuperscript{69} I have always remembered this very clearly.

*Picture of a Book titled* China’s Leftist Disaster\textsuperscript{70}


*Hu Jie:* This book, “China’s Leftist Disaster” contains this account: “From 1959 to 1961, an abnormal number of deaths and a decreased birthrate adds up to about 40,000,000 people (4000 \textit{wan}).”


*Liu Faqing:* The effect of that thirty-five \textit{jin} worth of grain tickets was immense. Every day I added an extra half \textit{jin} and no more than that. Every day I bought a half \textit{jin} of cornmeal \textit{mantou} made by the school. By the time all thirty-five \textit{jin} of the grain tickets had been used up, more than seventy days had passed. By then it was nearly summertime, so there were some vegetables, some radish, that kind of thing.

**Part 7 on YouTube:**


*Liu Faqing:* And my suffering had begun to ease…I sent one or two more letters, to which she didn’t reply. I didn’t know anything about the situation. I still wrote to her, but she never replied. I knew in my heart that something must have happened.

**Title:** 1960


*Hu Jie:* In October of 1960 in Tianshui, some of the rightists who published the underground publication \textit{Spark}, and more than 30 other local people were arrested and sentenced to death. Simultaneously, Gu Yan was arrested in Shanghai and sentenced to 17 years but ended up being locked up for 20. Lin Zhao was arrested in Suzhou. After discovering that his daughter had been arrested, Lin Zhao’s father committed suicide. Zhang Chunyuan managed to escape, but was arrested several years later and executed by

\textsuperscript{69} This sentence implies that Lin Zhao felt that she and Liu Faqing were in a similar situation, and that their circumstances were not controlled by them but by others. It indicates that Lin Zhao felt any efforts to reform herself would make little difference to her situation.

\textsuperscript{70} The book pictured is by Wen Yu and is titled “Zhongguo ‘zuo’ huo” [China’s Leftist Disaster]. It was published in 1994, by Cosmos Books Ltd. in Hong Kong.
gunfire. We still haven’t been able to find even a single photograph of Zhang Chunyuan.\textsuperscript{71}

\textit{Hu Jie}: You must have already predicted the potential results.

\textit{Gu Yan}: Of course, but I thought that to do nothing was wrong. There is always a need for people to stand up. If among an entire people no one dares to stand up then that is a nation with no hope. It’s like this, as long as there’s one person…Lu Xun said there only needs to be one person who first stands up and cries out.

\textit{Hu Jie}: While in jail Lin Zhao wrote: “I often bitterly and indignantly think of the self-professed ‘official’ government’s repression and of their instruments of oppression perpetrating all kinds of evil. The people, particularly those of our generation, China’s youth, have been shackled by the poisonous snake of dictatorship and have endured such hardship. When I think about this absurd situation that continues to go on, I wonder how it has ruined the nation’s forces of justice and how it has increased worries among the people. Even more importantly, how have we allowed it to tarnish our country’s name and worsen the upheavals of this century? Facing this, can the youth be anything but rash and impetuous?”

\textit{Title}: 1962

\textit{Music Playing: Ode to the Motherland (Changge zuguo)}

\textit{Hu Jie}: In March 1962, the imprisoned Lin Zhao became seriously ill. Because Lin Zhao’s mother was a target of Party attempts to bring former opponents back to their side (\textit{shutongzhan duixiang}), and also, because Zhang Chunyuan, the ringleader of the publication \textit{Spark}, was still at large and the Public Security Bureau hoped to lure him into the open in order to capture him, they agreed to release Lin Zhao on bail for medical treatment.

\textit{Xu Juemin, Lin Zhao’s maternal 2\textsuperscript{nd} cousin. Former Dean of the Faculty of Literature at China’s Social Studies School}: We wanted her to go out on bail for medical treatment, but she refused to go. We tried to grab her and pull her out, but she grabbed ahold of a chair in the jail cell and refused to leave. It was a useless gesture and she saw through it. She said, “You think that you’re helping me but they’re just going to grab me again, so it’s a useless gesture.” She refused to leave. “I want to stay in prison to the end, until the end of the struggle.” She wouldn’t go. She had a steely courage and stubbornness. Later,

\textsuperscript{71} In the Chinese transcript this scene is followed by a series of interviews that are not in the version on Youtube. The first interview is with Tan Chanxue, a researcher at Dunhuang University and Zhang Chunyuan’s former fiancée. She was sentenced to 14 years in prison for her participation in publishing \textit{Spark}. The next two interviews are with an eyewitness, Dr. Wang, and with the Tianshui prison director Bai Jianjie. All of the interviews provide more background information on Zhang Chunyuan and on the arrests of those involved in the production of \textit{Spark}. (“Xunzhao” n.d.)
Lin Zhao’s Mother, Xu Xianmin, sent a very strong man who picked her up and carried her home.

Hu Jie: Once released on bail Lin Zhao went to her family home in Suzhou. While there she made contact with Huang Zheng, a rightist who had just been released from a laogai camp.

Huang Zheng, Former Platoon Commander (Paizhang) in the Chinese Reserve Army (zhiyuanjun), now retired: I said to Lin Zhao, Suzhou is a Heaven on earth, with plenty of rice and fish, but the neighborhood’s elderly all have edema! They’re eating soybean dregs, soy sauce soup! This area had previously always been a paradise that nurtured and fed the people.

Hu Jie: They were all starving?

Huang Zheng: Starving! There was nothing to eat! ... In the winter of 1961 on the farm, we’d get up every day and go pick up the dead. We’d take them away and bury them. And it wasn’t just one or two dead per day … The 40 to 50 year old elementary school teacher, the elementary school principal, an intellectual, he couldn’t bear the hunger anymore and collapsed.

Hu Jie: Huang Zheng joined the Volunteer Platoon in 1950 during the Korean War. In 1955, because he had a bad class/family background he left the army. In 1957 he was labeled a rightist and was sent to the seaside laogai in Jiangsu. In 1960 he was given the task of burying the camp’s dead, who had starved or died of illness.

Huang Zheng: They’d tell me those who had died the evening before, ‘Oh, Huang Zheng there’s five today.’ Five dead, so ten people were sent to deal with them. Ten rightists. We’d wrap them up in their quilts and we’d use rope from the army rations to tie them up and on the outside we’d sew it with linen thread. One loop around the neck and one around the feet and two people would carry the dead person using a thick bamboo pole. Grunting, we’d carry them to Xizhi Lake … We’d dig a pit, then bury them, papapa (the sound of dumping dirt into a grave), we’d bury them. After we finished there would be a mound of earth, and the civilians standing around watching saw it too. One, two, three, four, up to fourteen of them watching and waiting for us to finish and leave. Then they’d dig up the newly buried dead. What were they doing this for? They wanted the clothing and the quilts. The ordinary people in Subei didn’t even have their own quilts. ... When we came back to look the next day…Huh? We were confused about why the dead had been dug up. But then we realized it was the ordinary people who had come to take the quilts. The only good thing we could do then was to rebury the dead, not even caring about seeing their naked asses. We just reburied them. When I was in Wanbei (Anhui Province’s northern part), I also saw the bodies of people who had starved to death, so how could the government policies have been good? At that time we also knew that it
wasn’t the result of a natural disaster, it was entirely the fault of government policies. There were more important things to deal with than a so-called ‘Great Leap Forward.’

Chen Aiwen, Lin Zhao’s former classmate at Beijing University: In the spring, Lin Zhao came to look for me. I knew that she had been released on bail for medical treatment. To start off I asked her,

**Part 8 on Youtube:**

Chen Aiwen: What do you think you’re doing? I knew that she had been arrested for an underground publication. I blamed her. What are you doing producing these kinds of things? … She replied with words that I still remember now. She said, “I think that we shouldn’t have to live this way. We need to change this kind of a life.” I said, you’re wrong! At the time I really believed in Chairman Mao, I really trusted the Communist Party. I said, “The Communist Party will surely be triumphant throughout the world. I’m not talking about Communism in the abstract. I’m talking only about the concrete examples of the Chinese Communist Party and Stalin’s Communist Party. These Communist Parties will be triumphant throughout the world. The masses of the era want to live under Communism. Of course these particular years were a mistake, these three years.” This was what I said to her. This kind of talk made Lin Zhao feel there was nothing to discuss with me; there was no good topic. We had no common language. Things had changed.

Hu Jie: One time Lin Zhao went to see her homeroom teacher (banzhuren) from her time at the Sunan College of Journalism, Mister Hu Ziheng.

Hu Ziheng: She said, while pointing at my nose, “I have been very obedient to you. You taught me very reasonable, revolutionary principles, but you never taught me how be a person. You never taught me that.” When she said “person” she implied quotation marks. By “person” she was referring to the bad guys, the leftists. But I didn’t argue with her, I said don’t come here and make such a commotion! She started hitting the desks and chairs. I was afraid other people would hear. It was that kind of time. We were locked up. I was by myself in the classroom. People outside were able to come and go. I said, “People can hear! Don’t make so much noise! What does it accomplish? What use is it for you to come speak to me?” She said, “No.” She cursed me, the words like pouring rain. She told me a story that I can’t remember now but that was purely intended to mock me. Something about how you ignorant (yumei wuzhi) people still haven’t woken up and opened your eyes.

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72 In the Chinese transcript there is an archival recording included here. It is about a Communist Party meeting held in September 1962 in which Mao Zedong stated that the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was ongoing and that the country must guard against revisionism. ("Xunzhao" n.d.)

73 In the Chinese transcript it states that Hu Ziheng was a former General Manager of Shanghai’s Liberation Daily newspaper. ("Xunzhao" n.d.)
Hu Jie: From jail, Lin Zhao wrote a letter to the People's Daily newspaper: “For a long time now, totalitarianism and the official policy of keeping the people ignorant has, of course, been for the purpose of maintaining power. It also stems from idealization of feudalism and deep, slavish, blind worship. You’ve crowned Mao Zedong a living son of Heaven wearing Western clothing (yangpao). You tried everything to deify him, through efforts both in and outside of the Party. Using beautiful words (meihao cizao) and a collection of correct concepts (zhengque gainian jihe), he [Mao] has been disguised as an unparalleled idol. You have cultivated people’s individual superstitions towards Mao.”

Hu Ziheng: What she said [when speaking out], was not just one or two sentences, like others who were labeled as rightists. She was very systematic and theoretical when she pointed out problems. Demonstrating that this is why we truly need reform, but not all at once. She wasn’t saying that change would come in an instant. Nowadays we can see that what she said was not incorrect. All the problems she saw are now all things that we want to work on, but that wasn’t the case 50 years ago. You couldn’t do those things then.

Photograph caption: Lin Zhao (1949) in a classroom at the Sunan College of Journalism.

Hu Ziheng: But all her talk then was utterly taboo. If I wanted to sympathize with her or say the same things, I could have been labeled a counterrevolutionary. Given the political conditions at that time and her words, if I wanted to sympathize or speak alongside her I could be judged a counterrevolutionary.

Photograph caption: Lin Zhao (1949) at the Sunan College of Journalism

Hu Jie: While in jail Lin Zhao wrote: “It’s true that we’re willing to make sacrifices. We don’t even avoid shedding our blood. But given this, is there any way to wash the blood away so that a free life can stand up and emerge from the bloody tears? Throughout history the blood of the Chinese people has always flown too much. Even among the ruins of this mid-century China, couldn’t political struggle be more enlightened in form and create progress so that we needn’t resort to drawing blood?”

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao and Huang Zheng drew up a plan for reforms in China that contained eight propositions. Yet their lives were being monitored early on. In December 1962, Lin Zhao was again arrested and imprisoned. Huang Zheng was arrested soon after and sentenced to 15 years.

Hu Jie: In the course of my research for this film, Mr. Chen Weisi was the only one who had seen Lin Zhao’s files and who would also speak with reporters. In 1981 he wrote an essay entitled, The Death of Lin Zhao that was published in the journal Democracy and the Legal System. Shortly afterwards all of Lin Zhao’s files were sealed.

Hu Jie: When you wrote this essay which of the documents you consulted did you actually write about?
Chen Weisi, formerly a reporter for Shanghai’s ‘Democracy and the Legal System’ magazine, 85 years old: I went to the Public Security office in Jing’an district to examine Lin Zhao’s documents. It was during the ‘Crush the Gang of Four’ period, so this was the beginning of democratic reforms and people could see such things, but you still had to do so carefully. There were a lot of things in the files that I didn’t dare to write about.

Hu Jie: But you were able to see all of the files at that time?

Chen Weisi: I read them all. After reading them all I felt that this essay was a chance to take advantage of loopholes at the time. Once more rules were broken then we could discuss it again. So I held back quite a bit of information, which is a real pity.

Hu Jie: While in jail Lin Zhao wrote, “With regard to the handcuffs, no one can guess how many variations have been created to restrain: one pair secures the back of the hand to the back of the hand, they put on two pairs at once. Sometimes your hands are crossed, sometimes they’re palm to palm. The most inhuman and oppressive thing is, no matter whether I’m on a hunger strike, having an attack of gastritis and in deathly amounts of pain, and even when I’m dealing with special feminine issues, I am forbidden from having my handcuffs removed or adjusted. I’ve never had any relief. I’ve never had two sets of cuffs temporarily reduced to just one.”

Hu Jie: Did the archives contain Lin Zhao’s blood-ink writings?

Chen Weisi: Yes, they did.

Hu Jie: What were they written on?

Chen Weisi: On yellow paper, and upon careful examination it wasn’t very easy to read.

Hu Jie: So you couldn’t quite make out the words?

Chen Weisi: You could make them out and read them ok, but after so many years the colour had faded a little.

Hu Jie: Was there anything written on other things, for example on cloth or pieces of clothing?

Chen Weisi: I didn’t see anything written on clothing.

Hu Jie: What kinds of things made up the majority of her files?

Chen Weisi: Interrogation notes. All of the files had those.

Hu Jie: I have heard that those notes, the notes from her interrogations, Lin Zhao’s replies, her replies to the questions were extremely brilliant, is that true?
Chen Weisi: Yes. I was only able to examine the file for half a day. I couldn’t painstakingly examine it all. The most important point was that we had confidence in democracy at that time, but we still weren’t at ease. I felt that this was a very dangerous topic to be investigating.

Caption: Lin Zhao’s handwritten notes from prison. Originally written in blood, they were later written out in pen.

Hu Jie: While in jail Lin Zhao wrote, “How can this not be blood? They treacherously used our naivety, integrity and idealism. They used our good intentions, our pure hearts, and our passionate excitement to stir us up and order us about. The cunning villains used our innocence, naivety and honesty; they incited and steered our virtue, purity and fervent temperaments. When we grew up a little and realized the actual absurdity and cruelty of the situation and began to demand our democratic rights, we were subjected to unprecedented persecution and suppression. How can this not be blood? Our youth, passion, friendship, learning, careers, ideals, wishes, happiness, freedoms, were all sacrificed to the terrible rule of this wicked tyranny. How can this not be blood?”

Hu Jie: The writings on the screen are from a letter Lin Zhao wrote entitled “To the People’s Daily.”

Part 9 on Youtube:

Hu Jie: Including her other essays, she wrote a total of 1,400,000 characters. A large number of these were written in Lin Zhao’s own blood. A security official risked his or her life to get out the writings that we now have, but to this day we don’t even know who it was, or what their name was.

Caption: Lin Zhao’s jailhouse writings

Hu Jie: What we know at present is that Lin Zhao, deprived of pen and paper, used her own fresh blood and a sharp hairpin to write over 200,000 compositions, including songs and poetry. It is unique in the history of human thought, or even in the history of humankind.

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao wrote on the walls of her cell, “No, no, God please don’t let me go mad. As long as I live, she [subtitles use the feminine version of ta 她] must help preserve my mind and my memory. But being in such a difficult and sinister endlessly tangled mess, I’m close to really going crazy. God. God. Please help me. I’ll soon be driven mad, but I can’t go crazy. I don’t want to go crazy.”

74 For this passage alone I used Stacy Mosher’s translation of Jin Zhong’s 2004 review of the film as my starting point. (Zhong 2004)
Women singing: “A high-bridged nose, a pair of double eyelids, and red lips neither thick nor thin. And her mind must be like mine. [For my washing machine] I want a double cylinder washer-dryer set. The best fridge is a three-door fridge. The colour television must come with a remote control.”

Hu Jie: We wanted to discuss Lin Zhao’s situation in jail, but none of the jail employees would speak with us.

Xu Juemin: The people who harmed Lin Zhao are still there today, they’re still entrenched in their high positions. At least that’s what I have heard, but I don’t even know who they are. But I have been told that Shanghai still has the same people in high positions.

Photograph caption: Xu Jinyuan, Lin Zhao’s maternal uncle, Minister of the Jiangsu Province Communist Youth Department. In 1927 he was executed in Nanjing by the order of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kaishek).

Hu Jie: On April 12, 1964, Lin Zhao wrote a poem in memory of her maternal uncle Xu Jinyuan. “April 12th – A day buried deep in the dust
Who will again remember the blood shed 37 years past
The dead are gone, his descendants offer sacrifices
With tears of blood.
Uncle, your niece cries for you in her red jail cell
I know you, through the melody of the Internationale (Guojige)
My mother taught me, and you taught my mother
Perhaps you know, the nation for which you sacrificed your life, like so many others,
Is now guilty with no freedom. It is full of starving slaves.”

Hu Jie: By December 1964, Lin Zhao had been in prison for four years. She was written about in the Shanghai, Jing’an District Prosecutor’s record book. With regard to her original writings it says, “Aiya, since political prosecutions began, there has never been

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75 A high-bridged nose and double eyelids are traditional markers of Chinese beauty and would be desirable in a daughter-in-law.
76 Hu Jie told me that this scene was included for two reasons. The first being that the women singing are the same age as Lin Zhao would have been, had she lived. The second is related to the lyrics; the women are singing about things they want: a pretty daughter-in-law for their son, and top quality appliances for their homes. This demonstrates the materialism (wuzhihua) in contemporary Chinese society. According to Hu, the Chinese government prefers for Chinese people to concentrate on achieving material rather than spiritual goals (wuzhi de zhuqi versus jingshen zhuqi). He felt this led many people to not bother with history, focusing instead on consumerism. (Hu 2009)
77 In the Chinese transcript Hu Jie here mentions an undated letter Lin Zhao had written to her mother in which she spoke of yearning to eat so many things. She listed 56 things she dreamt of eating, (“Xunzhao” n.d.)
another with such clever literary skills (weiyou ruci zhi miaowenye).”  
Lin Zhao saw the prosecution book and wrote 3739 characters commenting on and criticizing the content. The prosecution book said, “Lin Zhao approves of private ownership [the capitalist line]. She has been recruiting rightists in vain, trying to revive capitalism in my country.” To which Lin Zhao noted, “It’s more correct to say that it’s a plan to gather activists from across Mainland China to resist political violence. In the ancient and profound ruins of this mid-century we promote restoration and a movement to liberate humanity.”

**Sign:** Huzhou Bus Station

**Zhu Guo, Lin Zhao’s classmate at Sunan College of Journalism:** “In the silence you cried out. During the days of insanity, you remained sane. When you bled for the last time, it was for your beloved country. You died in a haze, but you’re sure to be revived in the clear and boundless sky.”

**Hu Jie:** That was Lin Zhao’s classmate from Sunan College of Journalism in the 1950s, Mr. Zhu Guo. Today he has traveled 1000 miles to visit a stranger at Qufu Normal University. He is carrying the final words of his recently deceased wife in his mind.

**Zhu Guo:** She told me to come see you. But she died on March 2nd. So now I’m not coming to you alone, but I’m coming as two people. My wish has been fulfilled. I’m here representing the questions of two people.

**Zhang Yuanxun:** Go ahead and ask what you like. And look after yourself. I didn’t cry very much myself. Why? Because the things lost in this life make us stronger.

**Zhu Guo:** Yes, yes. I also didn’t cry.

**Hu Jie:** Among the people we interviewed, Zhang Yuanxun was the only one who had seen Lin Zhao in prison. This former Beijing University student had sparked the 5.19 movement in 1957 by publishing in *The Square*. He was sentenced to seven years in prison. In May 1966, Zhang Yuanxun had served his sentence and was newly released. In spite of the risk, he went straight to Shanghai’s Tilanqiao Prison and, stating that he

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78 The tone seems intended to mock Lin Zhao, not to truly praise her.
79 He means that he is there representing both himself and his recently deceased wife.
80 After this scene, the Chinese transcript includes a notice from the Beijing Intermediate People’s Court stating that Zhang Yuanxun was sentenced to eight years in prison. (“Xunzhao” n.d.)
81 According to Pan 2008, Zhang’s sentence may have technically been completed, but “he was ordered to undergo ‘continuing reform’ [at the labour camp]. The only change was that he could go home once a year.” (Pan 2008: 46) It was on one of these visits home that he went to visit Lin Zhao. Upon Zhang’s return to the labour camp he was placed in solitary confinement and interrogated “by officers who suspected his meeting with Lin Zhao was part of some plot against the party...He remained in the cell for 138 days, then spent a decade toiling in prison farms and coal mines.” (Pan 2008: 49)
was Lin Zhao’s fiancée, went to visit her.

Caption: Shanghai Tilanqiao Prison

Zhang Yuanxun: Upon entering the prison compound, there was someone there waiting for us. I later found out that this was the Vice-Warden of the Tilanqiao Prison. His surname was Duan. He immediately said to me, “Zhang Yuanxun, you’ve come. We’ve already discussed the situation and you’re welcome here. I hope that through her relationship with you, Lin Zhao can come to realize the error of her ways. So that she can reform herself.” Actually, he said what I was already thinking. I also hoped that Lin Zhao would change her tactics a little, even just understanding the ways of the world enough to better protect herself. I didn’t want her to pay such a high price, to sacrifice herself. He said, “Zhang Yuanxun, you of course understand our situation here at Tilanqiao.” He knew that I had also been in prison. “You know that permitting your visit is an allowance on our part. If you have any ulterior motives for this meeting, the consequences will be very serious. Ok then. Follow me.” Warden Duan led us inside. We went straight ahead without turning. At the very end I looked up and saw a big doorway, the entrance to the prison itself.

Zhang Yuanxun: I heard some footsteps. They were very loud and I thought it was Lin Zhao coming, but it wasn’t. It was a group of military officers. There were more than ten of them and they all carried rifles. I had never seen a procedure like this. They [the officers] all sat down on a row of chairs in front of us. Then I heard another set of footsteps and Lin Zhao entered. She was followed by two more military officers who were carrying rifles and looking very serious. They were there to guard her; you could call it going overboard…She was wearing a white shirt. This was in May. It was filthy. She had a worn-out, dirty jacket draped across her shoulders. Her hair was long and white. It seemed about a third of her hair had turned white. There was a handkerchief tied on her head on which she had written one word in blood, “Injustice (yuán).” In her hand she carried a tattered bundle of cloth. As soon as she walked in the door I stood up and we just looked at each another. She gave me a childlike smile. The whole room was struck dumb. Later the warden said he had never seen her smile like that before.

Hu Jie: Once, Lin Zhao went on a hunger strike and after being revived she bit her finger and wrote the following poem on the wall of her cell, “Life is like a beautiful tree, love like a blooming flower. When freedom is clearly present, you joyfully welcome the day, life towers over all, and your love goes on unending. I would rather sacrifice my life for freedom, than be imprisoned forever.”

Zhang Yuanxun: I bought different types of cakes and other food for her, and she was very happy. According to convention I pulled out the bag and I said to the cadres, “Please examine these.” And without question they examined them all. They used pliers to open the powdered milk tin. They ripped open the sealed bags of powdered milk and then used an iron drill to poke it. Then they looked at the cakes. They plunged the drill into each one. After inspecting everything the Cadres said ok.
Part 10 on Youtube

Zhang Yuanxun: They passed the food to Lin Zhao. Lin Zhao took a piece of the cake and said, “You have a piece. Please I insist.” I didn’t think there was any point to me eating, it had been so much trouble to bring the food in the first place, so I didn’t eat any. I said, it’s so hard for you to eat, you eat it. If you eat it’ll be like I ate it…So in the end she picked up the cake to eat. After one bite she turned to face one of the officers at the rear, with a rifle slung over his shoulder, and said, “Get me some water.” She said it that rudely. He gestured to someone outside the door and someone also wearing an officer’s uniform immediately brought in a thermos and a cup and placed them on the table. The female doctor poured Lin Zhao some water and she ate and drank. She was very easygoing, and the room was very calm. She said, “I’m going to give you something.” I couldn’t imagine what she would have to give to me. What on earth could she have to give me? When she had entered the room she had been carrying a tattered bundle of cloth. She picked that up and opened it to reveal out a bundle of paper. I thought it was very strange, what could be inside? When she first pulled it out I couldn’t tell what it was, but as I got closer I suddenly realized it was a sailboat. ‘Once, strong winds cut the waves, just as I raise the sails and cross the seas.’ This is a Li Bai poem.

Zhang Yuanxun: She said, “I’m going to take advantage of this chance to speak with you. If I should die…if they murder me. My mother and little brother and sister are weak. Please look after them. They are so pitiable. Please, please.” After saying this she began to cry.

Hu Jie: As a result of Lin Zhao’s unyielding resistance while in jail, she suffered from cruel and malicious torments. One time, after being beaten by a female jail guard, she wrote, “I’m silently scraping out the bloodspots left on the wall. I need only think of that distant and yet close, merciful God and I can find the words to speak. This solitary indignant child with her mind full of grievances prays wordlessly. Heavenly Father. I don’t care. I don’t care about the wicked thoughts of that demon who bullies me so. I don’t care. I absolutely don’t care about anything.”

Mo Luo, Popular (minjian) Thinker: The execution by gunfire of Wang Shenyou in Shanghai during that time period is a rather typical case. He was very well-versed in Marxist theory. He was able to use Marxism in order to criticize some of the real situations and problems of that time period. It was a way to get away with criticizing the practices of the Maoist era. He was already a rather interesting person. But Lin Zhao didn’t limit herself to using Marxism, she found more profound inspiration in Western tradition. She found Christianity. Christianity inspired her not just from a cultural perspective…from the moment Lin Zhao found belief I think that her inner heart was connected to God with love. We can see from the few essays that are available for us to

82 This is from a Li Bai poem titled ‘行路难。’ There is a typo in the film’s subtitles. The original line is ‘长风破浪会有时，直挂云帆济沧海’ but the film writes the second line as, ‘且挂云帆济沧海.’ The two lines imply that one day Lin Zhao will have a chance to show her talent and live her dreams.
Poem or essay by Lin Zhao, titled: The Wings of Freedom

Mo Luo: We can see that she often used the word ‘misery (kunan)’ in both ordinary narratives and in poems and songs. She used god’s holy love to examine all living things and she saw that our miseries are numerous. So she had a very profound and vast heart. She even had empathy for those who had turned on her and criticized her. She had pity for them.

Hu Jie: “I started to write a book using my blood-ink called “Tell the people.” The first page of the short introduction was written in one breath over the course of half a day. I believe that anyone who reads it will be unable to avoid feeling the deep, blazing sorrow and passion.”

Qian Liqun, retired teacher in the Literature Department of Beijing University, reading from an essay by Lin Zhao and commenting on it: “She herself bore a cross and went to war for freedom, as a person of high ideals. Bearing the cross as a freedom fighter.” This is perhaps of great significance. She had a specific interpretation of freedom. She said, “Freedom is a complete and inseparable whole. As long as there are people being enslaved, life on earth cannot be truly and completely free.” For 50 years of Chinese history there had been no other such clear-cut contribution to freedom... “As long as those enslaved have no freedom, even those who enslave others also have no freedom.” This issue that Lin Zhao raises is extremely significant. Again and again she was introspective and critical of herself, of her own stubbornness and childishness. As she began to reflect upon her naiveté, she began to become conscious of such issues and realized that such youthful passion could be dangerous if misused. As a result she refined her position: “We are enslaved under a deeply tyrannical rule. If we don’t want to be slaves, we can make our bodies our tools of resistance. But we must avoid establishing a new system of slavery. We want to resist enslavement and oppression, and we must be sure not to reestablish a new system of slavery once we succeed.” This point is very significant because history has shown us that this has happened already.

Hu Jie: Two years after Lin Zhao wrote down these thoughts, Mao Zedong began the Cultural Revolution.

Images from the Cultural Revolution, including video of Zhang Wentian and Peng Dehuai being condemned.

Hu Jie: In 1965 Lin Zhao’s sentence was revised. New offences were added to her list of crimes, recorded as follows, “The accused has been in jail for the past few years. From the moment she entered custody she has refused to be reeducated. She has written many reactionary things in blood, for example, The Image of a Soul’s Speech and Around 180,000 Characters, Jesus is Still on Earth, Not Practicing is Still Practicing, Practice 2, Practice 3, A Flower Blooms in the Solemn Month of May, Sorrowful Aspirations in a Prison Cell, Autumn Poem, Self-criticism, A Blood Poem Inscribed on Clothing,
Postscript to a Blood Poem on Clothing, and so on, tens of thousands of characters. The employees have made every effort to educate her, trying to help this solitary prisoner. There was a person specially assigned the task of educating her. Her family members admonished her, and other such measures. But the accused refuses to repent and mend her ways. She openly states she’ll never give up her viewpoint or change her stand.

Hu Jie: On May 31st, 1965, Jing’an District court in Shanghai sentenced Lin Zhao to an additional 20 years in prison. Upon receiving the sentence, Lin Zhao pricked her finger and wrote a declaration on the backside of the paper, “Yesterday, you members of the so-called court of justice, misused the name of law to sentence me to 20 years in prison. This is an extremely foul, extremely shameful judgment. Still, it really makes me extremely proud as it is like a certificate demonstrating that Lin Zhao is a warrior fighting for freedom. I am acting correctly to create justice.”

Xu Juemin: She took her whole life and gave it away for the struggle for the democratic cause. She wanted her life and death to demonstrate to the world, to the Chinese people, why she died. I think that all of Lin Zhao’s paths in life say that if China doesn’t take the road towards Democracy, the people will never be truly happy.

Part 11 on Youtube:

Hu Jie: This is where Lin Zhao and her mother and younger brother and sister used to live in Shanghai.

Hu Jie: Which room is it?

Ni Jingxiong: This one. (knocks on door) Please open the door and I’ll explain a little. This is where Xu Xianmin used to live. We’re here to commemorate her. We’re publishing a book and would like to take a few pictures of her old home.

Woman in apartment: Who’s Xu Xianmin. I don’t know that name.

Ni Jingxiong: She was a former resident here, the original resident.

Hu Jie: Teacher Ni, this is where you used to come visit then?

Ni Jingxiong: Yes, I often came here.

Hu Jie: Lin Zhao and her mother were here then?

Ni Jingxiong: And many other people who came here to visit. Zhang Chunyuan and others all came here. Take a look, the window frame is still the same. I think that it can be opened even wider. That window frame is still exactly the same.

Hu Jie: It was in this room that Lin Zhao’s mother was asked to hand over five fen to cover the cost of the bullet used to kill Lin Zhao. At the time, Lin Zhao’s sister Peng
Lingfan was on the landing. This is her recording:

*Peng Lingfan:* It was afternoon, on the first of May 1968. After coming inside he [the police officer] asked, he asked my mother, are you Lin Zhao’s relative? My mother said yes. He said, your daughter has been executed by gunfire, you owe five fen for the cost of the bullet. My mother didn’t understand what he was saying. I was standing next to her and I understood, but my mother didn’t.

*Photograph Caption:* Peng Lingfan, Lin Zhao’s younger sister.83

*Peng Lingfan:* Finally he said, What’s with you? Get out five fen for the bullet fee. I took out five fen from a drawer and gave it to him. Then he asked my mother for her signature. Finally, he left. My mother became faint and passed out. Later we found out that she had secretly been executed on April 29th.

*Photograph Caption:* Xu Xianmin, 1936, 3rd theatre of operations, Shanghai Songpu 3rd District Assistant Director.

*Hu Jie:* Lin Zhao’s mother, a heroine of the anti-Japanese resistance, who enthusiastically assisted the Communist revolution…

*Photograph Caption:* Xu Xianmin. Head of Dahu newspaper. Chairwoman on the board of the Sufu Long-distance bus company.

*Hu Jie:* …died seven years later on a street corner by the Bund in Shanghai. Some people say she was beaten to death, others say it was a sudden illness.

*Shen Zeyi:* I don’t know why, I always think of her [Lin Zhao] as a torchlight on a mountain. In the cold and bleak foggy mist of the night, in the center of a vast expanse of white snow, solitary, beautiful, an awe-inspiring, inviolable light. And her light shines as widely as possible, conquering the darkness.

*Hu Jie:* From jail Lin Zhao wrote, “As an individual, my struggle for human rights is all-encompassing and done with integrity. These are motivations that are beyond reproach. As a Christian, my life belongs to my God – my beliefs. In order to persist in following God’s path, or to speak about my path in God, the path of a servant of God, Jesus’s

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83 Peng Lingfan immigrated to the United States in the 1980s and refused to be interviewed on camera for the film. She was back in China visiting and was so nervous she would only answer a few of Hu Jie’s questions. (Pan 2008: 71) Since the film was completed she has written a memorial essay for her sister and has been interviewed in some overseas Chinese-language newspapers. Hu told me that she felt resentment towards many of the people interviewed in the film; she was upset hearing the great praise they heaped on Lin Zhao. She felt now they say she’s a hero, but why didn’t they say something before? (Hu 2009)
political line. This youth has offered body and soul and paid a heavy price. This is what you have demanded, and it is also payment for your sins. Gentlemen, humanity, this is humanity. This is the compassion of the human heart. Why do I have these sentiments? Even for you, why do I still have compassion? In the final analysis, it’s not just conformity. I am simply following the expectations given by God. The Heavenly Father bestows compassion, pity and wisdom. When confronting darkness and fear, the bloody center of your government’s power, and the kernel of your evil, I can still see that your humanity has not entirely left you. There is a chance that a flash of your humanity may still emerge. Thus, I can see that deep in your hearts there must still be some humanity that hasn’t vanished. Thinking on this, I begin to weep with even greater sorrow.”

Qian Liqun: So she’s saying that she’s is dying for a just cause. I am a blood sacrifice. I am offering my blood on a sacrificial altar, but I don’t want anyone else’s blood to be shed. She hoped that for peace there would be a gain in the expression of humanitarianism, for the value of life.

*Title: 1968*

*Hu Jie:* On April 29, 1968 Lin Zhao was executed by gunfire in Shanghai. She was 35 years old.

*Text:* To this day, we haven’t been able to read the two long poems that led to Lin Zhao’s arrest and imprisonment, *Song of the Seagull* and *The Torture of Prometheus*. Lin Zhao said she acted the way she did because, after having lost her way, she returned to her Christian conscience.

*Hu Jie:* After several years of research for this film, I finally found the location of Lin Zhao’s remains. I left for Shanghai immediately.

*Title: Shanghai*

*Red Characters on stone: Xi Garden*

*Hu Jie:* In a huge room filled with thousands of cinerary caskets, I finally spotted Lin Zhao’s casket. Written on the small wooden box are the words, “Lin Zhao. Born 1935. Died 1968.”

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84 Here, Lin Zhao is referring to herself.
85 In this scene Hu Jie opens up the package containing Lin Zhao’s ashes and finds a lock of hair wrapped in a newspaper. It is the *Liberation Daily (Jiefang ribao)* and it is dated Sept. 13, 1966. The headlines visible on the paper are reflective of the politics of that time, including, the headline on the left which states “Mao Zedong’s Thought Guides Us.” The headline on the right says something about the Cultural Revolution but I can’t make it all out.
86 Lin Zhao was executed in April 1968, but the newspaper is dated 1966. This discrepancy may be explained by an interview Peng Lingfan (Lin Zhao’s sister) gave to
Text: The filmmakers have been unable to film any writings, documentation or witnesses to tell us about the five hundred days that passed before Lin Zhao was executed. The name of whoever ordered Lin Zhao’s execution is unknown.

This film is solemnly dedicated to Lin Zhao’s martyred spirit.

Thank you to all of those who silently offered supplies and support to help finish this film.

Produced, directed and edited by Hu Jie

Shot by Hu Jie and Hu Min.

Epoch Times Australia. Although Epoch Times is rather unreliable, it is the only place I have been able to find a reference to the hair in Lin Zhao’s cinerary casket. In the interview, Peng states that Lin Zhao gave the hair to their mother while she was released on bail, long before her execution in 1968. Peng also states that her mother was the one who placed the hair inside the casket following Lin Zhao’s death. (張：林昭的頭髮是怎麼留下来的？彭：是我母親留下來的。張：是林昭在監獄的時候還是在家裏的時候？彭：可能是她保外的時—— Zhang 2008). Hu Jie also supported this when I interviewed him in 2009, stating that he wasn’t sure of the circumstances, but that it must have been Lin Zhao’s mother who placed it there, using whatever paper was handy to wrap up the hair. (Hu 2009)

87 The five hundred days for which information is unavailable begins in 1966, after Zhang Yuanxun visited her in prison, and lasts until her execution in 1968.
He calls himself a documentary film labourer. For ten years he has been shooting films about lower class labourers. One of his documentaries, *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* has circulated among the Chinese population and has prompted many people to begin discussing Lin Zhao, the spirited and brave young woman the film is about.

Hu Jie, the bearded man who focuses his lens with indignation on the suffering of others, has remained largely mysterious and silent. He has agreed to a special interview with *Minjian* because he says he belongs to the people and because he is an activist.88

**Remote Mountain (Yuan Shan)**

“Remember! If you hear a cracking sound then it’s probably about to cave in, but you still have time to escape. If you do get stuck in the mine, don’t panic. You can eat coal to survive.”

This is what the mine workers told Hu Jie as he followed them down the 12,000 foot deep mine.

In the darkness, Hu Jie could only hear the sound of his oxygen-deprived panting. He could see nothing. The workers told him, “Here it’s only big enough for one person to pass, but here you can fit more people.”

Hu Jie was the only one holding equipment. The mine workers were each expected to mine 1200 jin of coal every day. They knelt in water to dig out the coal and their only tools were a coal spade and a wicker basket as well as an oil lamp. About nine out of ten didn’t even have a safety helmet.

The workers had no contract, but there was an unwritten rule: A human life was worth 5000 yuan in compensation.

Because it cost them two yuan to take a shower, the workers went months without washing and their bodies were black with soot except for the whites of their eyes and their teeth. Their clothing was ragged and it made them look like savages. The locals referred to them as “Coal Pit Cats.” They really were living primitive lives.

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88 *Minjian* was a print magazine run by Zhai Minglei (formerly of the *Southern Weekend* newspaper) that was shut down in November of 2007. Zhai has since begun publishing articles on his blog. I am unclear whether this article was originally published in the print magazine or if it has only been published on the blog.
And so twenty years could pass.

In June of 1995, the bearded Hu Jie returned to the mine. He lived with the workers for two months, silently heading down to the mine each day with the workers. The stoic, quiet workers told him, “Life underground is harsh and there are many taxes we must pay. We must send our children to school. When we worked on the coast we never got paid and it made us angry, so we came here. But here, we get black lung disease after about 5 or 6 years of work and we get more and more breathing problems. Still, we’re willing to risk our lives for our children. We’re not afraid of cave-ins, we’re much more afraid of hitting water which would mean certain death.”

At this, Hu Jie picked up his camera and began filming.

He says, “We are told ‘Serve the People,’ but who are the People? These mine workers are the people, but who is serving them? They are people living on the verge of death. I am just a documentary film labourer.”

The workers in the mine all use tools that haven’t changed in 100 years. Only the mine head owns a modern piece of equipment: a semi-automatic small-bore rifle that he can use against outsiders or rebelling workers.

One day while filming, someone suddenly appeared. It turned out to be one of the mine cadres asking, “What are you filming this for?”

“I think that people will be shocked and amazed by these workers.”

“We feel the same way, but that’s just the way they are.”

All of the cadres who spoke with Hu Jie feigned calm, but when discussing the plight of the “coal pit cats” their faces would all begin to twitch.

Some of the workers questions moved Hu Jie to tears: “Your film, will it shame socialism or give it a bad name?”

“It is socialism that has shamed you. You should not have to live like this.”

Hu Jie felt a sense of humiliation on behalf of the workers. “Such dutiful people, their first thought is for the state.”

At the beginning of the project the mine manager, believing that Hu Jie was just a passing guest, invited him out to drink. Once drunk, the manager told Hu Jie, “We are committing crimes. The working conditions, the crawling they must do, are illegal. Destroying an entire mountain is illegal. When I no longer work here I will come and plant some trees.” The next day, in the early morning, the manager was still drunk and the fees for a cartful of coal were not collected.
One month later, the mine administrators realized that the situation was not suitable – that Hu Jie had been filming non-stop.

“They are going to kill you,” the mineworkers told Hu Jie, “Leave quickly.”

One evening at dusk, while standing on the grounds, Hu Jie felt a bullet fly over his shoulder, just missing his heart.

He left and that’s how he made the documentary *Yuan Shan*.

*MOUNTAIN SONG IN THE PLAINS (PINGYUAN SHANG DE SHAN GE)*

This was not the first time Hu Jie experienced a brush with death. Once, while documenting the migrations of Tibetans, Hu Jie walked while the Tibetans rode horses. He followed and filmed them for more than 30km. After a week he had arrived in a place 4000 meters above sea level where he separated from the group to go and get a battery. Because all the surrounding mountains looked similar he then got lost. After walking for a day he arrived back at the same place. Totally exhausted, Hu Jie collapsed. During this most dangerous time he suddenly had a thought – climb the highest mountain. Panting heavily, he would climb 10 meters at a time and then rest. After each 10 meters he would fix his eyes on his next objective. Finally he reached the mountaintop and was able to see the path he needed to follow. He walked from 7 in the morning until 8 at night and he survived.

Through the shadows of Hu Jie’s camera lens one sees only labourers. On the Shandong seashores, even in extremely strong winds, there are villagers who wade through the wild water picking seaweed. When they return to the shore they roll themselves a cigarette and smoke with their worn hands shivering.

There are people who ask Hu Jie, “Why are you filming such marginal people?” Hu Jie calmly answers, “They aren’t marginal people, they actually form the majority of China’s people. It’s just that they aren’t seen in the mainstream media. Calling them marginal people is only one point of view. It’s the point of view of those who have reaped benefits and who are now looking at China’s most common and numerous group. Do you think that workers who have been made redundant are a marginal group? These so-called ‘marginal people’ are labeled as such by the mainstream media, but in my view, it is the people who have benefited who should be seen as the ‘marginal people.’

“There are some documentary film directors who say that documentaries shine light on a dark world.” I ask.

“This is what the filmmakers personally feel, but what those labourers need isn’t light. All that documentaries can do is to open a window that allows people to mutually understand another way of living. The source of societal indifference is in a lack of
mutual understanding. Not understanding creates barriers and turns people into separate ‘atoms.’”

The world is far more complicated than we think.

Once, Hu Jie wanted to film the story of Luo Xiaojia who had been trafficked from Yunnan province to Shandong.

Before beginning filming Hu Jie thought that, “Trafficking humans is an extremely criminal act. I want to document this criminal process and at the same time help trafficked people to achieve a new life.”

[Note: Section on the trafficking film left untranslated.]

In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao (Xunzhao Lin Zhao de Linghun)

In Hu Jie’s workspace there is a drawing, a portrait. Layers of gauze wrapped with twine cover the face leaving on the eyes visible. This is Hu Jie’s favorite painting. (Figure 14).

This was how Lin Zhao looked the last time she was seen by a fellow prisoner. The prison was very terrifying – in order to stop Lin Zhao from speaking they used gauze and wrapped it around her head, leaving only the eyes visible. While gathering and recounting Lin Zhao’s story, Hu Jie tearfully painted this portrait.

Lin Zhao was typical of rightists targeted during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, but she herself was anything but typical. She was a gentle and frail girl that people called Sister Lin. She wrote 200,000 characters, using her own blood, to critique Mao’s dictatorship.

Lin Zhao was once a fervent revolutionary. She once forced a landlord to immerse himself, in wintertime, in a vat of water. She once looked to Mao Zedong as her own father. She once believed in the sayings, “Revolution has a cruel beauty,” and “I want to wash my soul clean.”

Slowly she began to think, “Mao Zedong is incorrect.” At that time, however, thinking was a dangerous activity. You could have personal doubts but no one dared to stand up and voice them. Fear was a part of life at that time, “like a shadow following the person,” and people could just disappear in one night without notice.

Hu Jie said, “She wasn’t crazy. Once, she had the opportunity to declare herself so. A doctor told her to acknowledge that she had mental problems because it could help her seem less responsible for her crimes. Lin Zhao replied, “I am not sick. If I state that I have a mental illness, then future people could view my writings as those of a crazy person, and that could mean they would ignore my heartfelt writings.”
In jail, in the midst of this cruel punishment, she had to wear heavy handcuffs at all times, even when she had her period and had to go to the washroom, and her scalp was torn. Lin Zhao was not crazy and instead became just an ordinary person and prisoner.

She wrote a letter to the prosecutors who had harmed her and been so cruel: “Gentlemen, humanity, this is humanity. This is the compassion of the human heart. Why do I have these sentiments? Even for you, why do I still have compassion? ... I can see that, still, your humanity has not entirely left you. There is a chance that a flash of your humanity may still emerge. Thus, I can see that deep in your hearts there must still be some humanity that hasn’t vanished. Thinking on this, I begin to weep with even greater sorrow.”

Once *In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao* was finished, it passed from hand-to-hand among the people who reacted with tears and who were moved and inspired. The film embodied the same meanings as in Hu Jie’s painting: When we see evil we can act. We can use our hands and feet to act. When our hands and feet are bound, we can use our mouths to cry out. When our mouths are clamped shut, we can use our eyes to stare. When our eyes are blindfolded, we can use our hearts to pray.

“This was a historical period that shattered beliefs and prevented them from being rebuilt, but what made Lin Zhao especially unusual was that even after her original beliefs had been crushed, she still sought and found authentic beliefs,” Hu Jie says, “This is perhaps the reason this film has been so widely circulated.”

This fragile girl, with her mouth, eyes and nose bound, was executed by gunfire 37 years ago, but this documentary film is filled with her powerful and strong spirit. It has aroused the awareness of so many people. This is truly a magical thing.

Actually, among those who have gained strength from Lin Zhao is Hu Jie himself.

In July 1999, after Hu Jie had been filming Lin Zhao’s story for one month, he was forced to leave his original work site and *danwei* (work unit).

“You jerks, you won’t allow me to continue working. I just want to make a good film. Let’s see who gets the last laugh,” says Hu Jie, who threw his heart into his work.

Eating meals of white *mantou* and salted vegetables, Hu Jie worked at gathering material. He supported himself with money earned selling his paintings. His paintings sell for 20 *yuan* and his illustrations for 5.

He didn’t have any letters of introduction or employee ID. Hu Jie simply placed himself in front of interviewees each time they gave their accounts of Lin Zhao.

“I just want more people to know Lin Zhao’s story.” While filming the documentary this was how Hu Jie began each interview.
At the beginning, Hu Jie saw Lin Zhao as a brave martyr, an unapproachable heroine. But while compiling the second edit, he was able to see a letter Lin Zhao had written to her parents from jail. The letter described all the snacks and other foods she dreamed of eating.

“Actually, Lin Zhou was a real food lover. While at home in Suzhou she often indulged in snack food. She craved food, she loved to eat.” Hu Jie smiled.

Gradually Hu Jie came to realize that Lin Zhao was a woman with many loves and stories.

While filming, friends gave Hu Jie a great deal of help. In each unfamiliar city, these average people welcomed him.

There was the public security officer who brought Lin Zhao’s writings from jail to give to her sister. For this, someone paid the cost with their life.

There was a middle-aged man who extended his hand to give Hu Jie a few thousand yuan. Hu Jie was astounded, but the man waved his hand saying, “Oh, take it. I’m a boss and this amount of money means nothing to me.” But when Hu Jie and the man came to know each other more deeply, Hu Jie came to realize that he was just an average retired worker. He was an extremely thrifty person. For his entire life he’d had only two dreams: to have someone tell and disseminate Lin Zhao’s story and to build an elementary school.

Each time one of Hu Jie’s films is ready to be released, he first always shows it to his critical friends. They discuss it in depth; they critique it. Each piece of feedback helps to improve the film. Together Hu Jie and his friends are creating their own culture.

Hu Jie is a very gentle person and he understands how to respect others. There are some documentarians or news reporters who forcefully impose themselves onto situations to film people. Hu Jie has never done this. Without exception, he always makes appointments according to the wishes of the interviewee, and only then does he uncover his camera lens.

Upon seeing TV reporters, with cameras rolling, pushing open doors, strongly pushing people to receive them, Hu Jie comments, “Behind that camera is power. I can’t belittle other people’s characters in order to achieve what I want.”

In Lin Zhao’s image, Hu Jie can also see tolerance.

Not long ago, in Dongbei, a university teacher named Lu Zusong showed In Search of the Soul of Lin Zhao to her class. One of her students informed on her. The school cancelled her teaching qualifications. While many people responded with indignation towards the female student who reported Teacher Lu, Hu Jie, in contrast, maintains a tolerant attitude. “This was a young female student. As she watched the Lin Zhao film she cried with fear.
She felt that this is something that could never happen; there could never have been such a time. She felt that the teacher must be tricking her, so she went and told the principal.”

While shooting the film, Hu Jie often encountered frightening dangers. But Hu Jie learned from Lin Zhao that, “Fear is of no use.” He paused for a moment then said, “If you can see through life and death, there is no fear.”

One person who made a deep impression on Hu Jie was a 70-year-old man, Lin Zhao’s former classmate. On the phone this man’s voice was clam and steady, but as Hu Jie opened the door to the man’s home the man began to howl and weep. Choking with sobs he said to the stupefied Hu Jie, “Marx said, ‘France has no shortage of people with wisdom, but there is a lack of those with moral integrity.’” He paused a moment, “I think that Lin Zhao is one of those with such integrity.”

“We were once a people lacking in integrity. Lin Zhao showed us we could have such integrity.”

This a story of love triumphing over fear.

**Citizen Activist Documentarian (Gongmin xingdong de jiluzhe)**

Independent is not the same as isolated. At Hu Jie’s side is a crowd of supporters. The biggest supporter is his wife. Her style of support is special, and together they have delineated the ‘boundaries’: “Since Hu Jie doesn’t need to support the household, the money for making his documentaries can’t come from the household. He solves the funding issues himself.” This sort of clear line has allowed Hu Jie to maintain a happy household in midst of a life of limited means. Documentary filmmaking hasn’t impacted on the household’s happiness.

[Note: The remainder of the article has not been translated.]
FIGURES

Figure 1. The opening panel of the *San-yuan-li* comic. The effects of British imperialism on the Chinese people.

1. Over a hundred years ago the British imperialists were importing opium into China, poisoning the Chinese people and draining out large sums of money, wildly attempting to ruin our country and destroy our people.

Figure 2. British brutalities against Chinese women and children.
Figure 3. Workers participating in anti-British fighting.

Figure 4. British cowardice in the face of the anti-British militia.

22. The morning of the thirtieth was greeted with the sound of gongs. The Anti-British Militia, five or six thousand strong, advanced in an imposing array behind the three-starred flag toward the Sifang fort occupied by the British pirates. The weavers, masons, and other workers of Canton also took part.

23. When the head of the British pirates, General Gough, saw the people surging up the hill toward the Sifang fort, carrying knives, spears, hoes, and axes, he was so scared he couldn't even eat his breakfast and, shaking with panic, he ordered the British troops to open fire.
Figure 5. The victories of the anti-British militia.

26. The Militia’s knives came chopping down, spilling out the brains of the British pirates and splashing their blood in every direction.

Figure 6. A Qing official reading an appeal from the British appealing to halt the rebellion in *San-yuan-li*.
Figure 7. The untrustworthiness of the landlords and the literati.

40. The landlords and the literati, in order to protect their wealth, came round to Xu Bao-chun’s side and began to urge the peasants to disband. Because the peasants at the time did not fully understand the true nature of the literati in the Anti-British Militia, they were fooled by them and they angrily began to disperse.

Figure 8. The persistence of the Chinese people.

42. On the day the British pirates retreated, the Anti-British Militia posted a notice attacking British imperialism’s crimes, ending with the firm statement, "We don’t rely on the Manchu forces nor do we need government pay. We use our own money and our own strength and if we don’t wipe out you pigs and dogs then, we cannot be considered true Chinese!"
Figure 9. The conclusion of the *San-yuan-li* comic.

43. The Chinese people kept their word. After the victory of San-yuan-li, the struggle of the Cantonese and of the people of all parts of China against the British continued for a hundred years. Today, just outside the village of San-yuan-li, there stands an imposing monument commemorating the martyrs who fell in the battle of San-yuan-li. Many millions of our people recall the glorious history of our ancestors' struggle against British imperialism; how they refused to give in and in the midst of many difficulties dealt a decisive defeat to the British. Their example gives us great courage for the future, to throw ourselves ever more firmly into the struggle against British imperialism.

Figure 10. The advantages of fighting barefoot. The British are burdened by their heavy boots.

30. The British troops were wearing heavy leather boots which stuck in the mud. Some were killed by the peasants using hoes, others fell to their knees and begged for mercy.
Figure 11. Scenes of violence against the British soldiers.
Figure 12. Promotional poster for the 2009 film, *Tian'anmen*.
Figure 13. Promotional posters for the 2009 film, *Founding of a Republic (Jianguo Daye)*.
Figure 14. Hu Jie’s painting of Lin Zhao.
Figure 15. Hu Jie and the author on March 19th, 2009. One of Hu’s paintings is visible in the background.
Figure 16. Lin Zhao as a teenager.
Figure 17. Bian Zhongyun and her family.
Figure 18. Wang Jingyao with his camera.
Figure 19. He Fengming.
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### APPENDICES

#### Appendix 1 – Complete Filmography for Hu Jie

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<th>Location</th>
<th>Equipment</th>
<th>Length</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Remote Mountain</td>
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<td>Qilian Mountains in Qinghai</td>
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<td>Migration</td>
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<td>Qilian Mountains in Qinghai</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Holy Light 圣光</td>
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<td>Nanjing</td>
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<td>1999 to 2005</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Little Angel 小天使</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Baobao and Beibei 宝宝贝贝</td>
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<td>Survival or Destruction 生存还是毁灭</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Garden in Heaven 天堂花园</td>
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<td>China</td>
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<td>150 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Vagina Monologues - Behind the scenes 阴道独白 幕后故事</td>
<td>2003 to 2004</td>
<td>Guangdong province, Shanghai, Beijing</td>
<td>DV Camera</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Painting for the Revolution – Peasant paintings from Hu County 为革命画画 — 户县农民画</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Hu County, Shanxi province</td>
<td>DV Camera</td>
<td>52 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Time Spent Filming</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>Length</td>
</tr>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Wang Keqin: Reporter</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>? County, Gansu province</td>
<td>DV Camera</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>记者王克勤</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Silence of Nu River</td>
<td>August 2005</td>
<td>Yunnan and Tibet</td>
<td>DVCAM Camera</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>沉默的怒江</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Though I am Gone</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>DVCAM Camera</td>
<td>70 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>我虽死去</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Red Art</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>England, China.</td>
<td>DVCAM Camera</td>
<td>70 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Co-directed with Ai Xiaoming)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>National East Wind Farm</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Yunnan, Jiangsu, Shanghai</td>
<td>DVCAM Camera</td>
<td>104 minutes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>国营东风农场</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Grain Crisis</td>
<td>2007 to 2009</td>
<td>Henan Province</td>
<td>DVCAM Camera</td>
<td>110 minutes</td>
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<td>粮食关</td>
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Appendix 2 – Selected Filmography for Wang Bing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>West of the Tracks 铁西区</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Fengming: A Chinese Memoir 和凤鸣</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Brutality Factory 残忍工厂 (Short Fictional Film</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>in ‘State of the World’ Collection)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Crude Oil 采油日记</td>
<td>2008</td>
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