



Figure 1 Wang Jingyao and his camera. Photographed by Hu Jie

Virtual Museums of Forbidden Memories: Hu Jie's Documentary Films on the Cultural Revolution

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The day after Bian Zhongyun, vice principal of a girls' middle school in Beijing, was beaten to death by her students on August 5, 1966, her husband, Wang Jingyao, bought a camera and took pictures of her bruised, distended, and naked body. He photographed their children as they washed and dressed their mother. He photographed the vilifying big-character posters that covered the inside and outside walls of their apartment. He also photographed the smoke rising from the chimney of the crematorium after her body was burned. He kept the photographs for four decades, waiting all the while to transfer them into the Cultural Revolution Museum, if such a museum is ever to be built (fig. 1).

The idea for a Cultural Revolution museum is usually attributed to Ba Jin, one of the most influential writers in contemporary China and a prominent survivor of persecution and incarceration during those “ten years of catastrophe.”¹ Ba Jin had first made this appeal in his best-selling 1986 memoir, *Random Thoughts* (*Suixiang lu*),² and many Chinese intellectuals have echoed this wish over the past two decades. Although the government has consistently ignored their pleas and circumscribed scholarly studies of the period, unofficial forms of memory have proliferated in autobiographical accounts and marketplaces of “CultRev” memorabilia collections. Maoist kitsch and propaganda, recycled into avant-garde

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1. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18.

2. Ba Jin, *Suixiang lu* (*Random Thoughts*) (Beijing: Sanlian, 1987).

and political pop art with more irony and cynicism than critical reflection, have also come to be exhibited in art galleries and consumer spaces around the world. In 2005 a private museum dedicated to the state-sponsored terror and turmoil of the Cultural Revolution finally opened in the remote city of Shantou, Guangdong Province, enabled by the good official connections of its founder and financier and by the sheer obscurity of its location.³ Nevertheless, the museum has received little press in China and could hardly compete with the many popular destinations of the state-sponsored “red tourism” that “eulogizes the brilliant cause of the [Communist] Party.”⁴ In the meantime, however, many “virtual museums” of the Cultural Revolution have been set up on the Internet, hosting historical images, documents, personal narratives, and scholarly articles.⁵ The “holdings” of these “museums” often overlap and replicate themselves in cyberspace, fighting, flaunting, and flirting with the cyberpolice in their tireless self-proliferation, marrying piracy with democracy, trauma with nostalgia, memory with amnesia. Yet their virtual and unofficial status has consistently kept the discourse around the “Cultural Revolution Museum” in the future tense, an unfulfilled but increasingly reiterated wish, in Ba Jin’s original formulation, to “stop history from repeating itself.”⁶

The “museum” that has finally come to “house” Wang Jingyao’s photographs of his wife’s body is a film shot on digital video and distributed on the Internet. Titled *Though I Am Gone* (*Wo sui si qu*, 2006), the documentary by Hu Jie purports to treat the “first notorious death in the Cultural Revolution” and “exhibits”

3. Its founder, Peng Qian, was a former Shantou deputy mayor with crucial support from regional officials, and one of the museum’s main financial contributors is a Hong Kong businessman known for his ties to Beijing. See Hamish McDonald, “At Last, Someone Dares to Blame Mao,” May 14, 2005, www.theage.com.au/news/World/At-last-someone-dares-to-blame-Mao/2005/05/13/1115843368043.html.

4. Lin Di, “China’s First Private Cultural Revolution Museum,” June 29, 2006, en.epochtimes.com/news/6-6-29/43345.html; Howard French, “Scenes from a Nightmare: A Shrine to the Maoist Chaos,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2005; “‘Re-experience the Long March’: China to Launch ‘Red Tourism’ Project,” July 22, 2004, english.peopledaily.com.cn/200407/22/eng20040722_150461.html.

5. The following virtual museums of the Cultural Revolution are noteworthy: Virtual Museum of the Cultural Revolution, www.cnd.org/cr; Morning Sun: A Film and Website about Cultural Revolution, www.morningsun.org; Chinese Holocaust Memorial, www.chinese-memorial.org. See also Guobin Yang, “‘A Portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing’: The Chinese Cultural Revolution on the Internet,” in *Re-envisioning the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, ed. Ching Kwan Lee (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 287–316.

6. Ba Jin, “A Cultrev Museum,” in *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*, ed. Geremie Barmé and John Minford (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 381–84.

Wang's photographs in the context of testimonial accounts and historical footage. Produced without support from official institutions or private enterprises, the minimalist yet powerful film is likewise circulated outside both the state and the market systems. After receiving some attention at the Oxdox film festival in the United Kingdom, the film's inclusion in Yunfest 2007, a major Chinese documentary festival, caused the government to cancel the event. Not surprisingly, the censorship has only enhanced the reputation of the film, which has been viewed tens of thousands of times on YouTube even while all related pages are blocked in China.

The filmmaker Hu Jie has become a well-known figure among Chinese intellectuals since making the documentary *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul* (*Xunzhao Lin Zhao de linghun*, 2004). Born in 1958, Hu Jie was an oil painter by training and began making documentaries in 1995. In 1999 he gave up his job at the Xinhua News Agency after hearing about the story of Lin Zhao (fig. 2), a young woman imprisoned in the 1960s for her writing and publication of criticism and protest against the Maoist regime. Deprived of pen and paper, she reportedly used hairpins and her own blood to write voluminous poems and essays on the jail wall, on bedsheets, and on her clothes, calling for freedom and decrying despotism. She was executed in 1968 at the age of thirty-five. Her story first came to light in 1981 with the publication of an article in the journal *Democracy and Legal System* (*Minzhu yu fazhi*).⁷ At that time the climax of the story was less the writing in blood than the fact that the police asked Lin Zhao's family to pay five cents for the bullet used for her execution. For the next two decades, however, her dossier was resealed, her story banned from reportage in the official media and swept into the historical dustbin until Hu Jie decided to "resurrect" her with his camera. At his



Figure 2 Lin Zhao. Still image from Hu Jie, *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul*

7. Chen Weisi, "Lin Zhao zhisi" ("The Death of Lin Zhao"), *Minzhu yu fazhi* (*Democracy and Legal System*) 3 (March 1981), nevergone.blogchina.com/nevergone/1851511.html.

own expense, he spent several years to track down and interview Lin Zhao's family, classmates, teachers, and friends; to gather various photographs, documents, and other relics of hers; and to revisit all the known sites of her short and tragic life. While the resulting documentary certainly could not be broadcast on Chinese official television, its complex historical references and pointed address to a Chinese public also made the film less translatable for an international audience. Thus, rather than distribute it through state media or foreign film festivals, Hu Jie traveled with the film all over China—mostly to university campuses—and listened to audience opinions, making revisions and additions. Like a missionary, he also gave out video compact discs of the film and allowed, even encouraged, his friends to duplicate it and pass it on. The film thus traveled by word of mouth, and the legend of Lin Zhao, soon dubbed the “Chinese Joan of Arc,” has become an inspiration to many liberal intellectuals and a focal point in the discussion of living in truth. The simple epigraph at the end of the film best spells out Hu Jie's mission: “Will history enter our memory? How will history enter our memory?”⁸

While hardly cinematic masterpieces, Hu Jie's two documentaries maintain a heightened and intriguing tension between the traumatic past and the oblivious present, between stubborn conventions and inventions with threadbare means, between the intimate confidentiality of interviews and their address of a larger public sphere, and, most important, between their museum/courtroom-like “objectivity” and the passionate “subjectivity” of testimony.

The relationship of Wang Jingyao and his photographs parallels Hu Jie's own relationship to his films, of which he is quite self-conscious. *Though I Am Gone* opens with two mechanical devices: a ticking clock and a single-lens reflex camera. The clock with its swinging pendulum, shot in close-up and in color, does not reappear but is echoed by two broken watches among the relics of the deceased toward the end of the film. The clock symbolizes not a real object but the relentless progression of historical time and the remnant heartbeats of the survivor. Time is running out, and the witnesses of history are passing away without having been given a chance to tell their stories. The camera that follows the clock, a folding camera made in Shanghai, likewise has allegorical status. We first see two hands, those of Wang Jingyao, fumbling and stabilizing the camera body before releasing the shutter; then the film cuts to a close-up of the lens itself, a shot reminiscent of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, except that here the

8. For an extensive account of the making of *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul*, see Philip P. Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 21–79.

emphasis is on the collaboration between a mechanical device and human hands. The intent is not that the kino-eye is superior to the human eye but that the former can *look at* what the latter cannot bear to *see*. As Siegfried Kracauer writes of the Medusa myth as cinematic allegory in *Theory of Film*:

We do not, and cannot, see actual horrors because they paralyze us with blinding fear. . . . we shall know what they look like only by watching images of them which reproduce their true appearance. These images have nothing in common with the artist's imaginative rendering of an unseen dread but are in the nature of mirror reflections. . . . As such they beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality.⁹

The camera, in this case a still camera, mediates but does not mitigate sights of horror, so that every time Hu Jie uses one of Wang Jingyao's photographs in the film, he precedes it with the same close-up of the camera lens with the clicking of the shutter and a white flash, an ellipsis of photographic exposure and psychic trauma. Yet Wang's photographs are not images of pure horror; they are occasionally punctured with beauty and tenderness. In a particularly striking photograph, their four children, each wearing a black cloth of mourning on his or her left arm, are lined up according to height in *Sound of Music* fashion behind their mother's body, dressed in a buttoned-up Mao suit (fig. 3). (Three years later, in 1969, a famous photograph was published in *China Pictorial* showing a family "Mao Tse-tung Thought Propaganda Team" from Guangdong Province, with a two-and-a-half-year-old girl leading a chorus of her five elder brothers and sisters and her parents, all holding Little Red Books and lined up according to height [fig. 4].)¹⁰

This incongruent mixture of horror and love, monstrosity and tenderness, pervades all of Wang's photographs, whether they are of rooms wallpapered by Red Guards with cursing big-character posters or Bian Zhongyun's corpse. When asked at the beginning of the film what made him overcome the psychic pain to take these pictures, Wang Jingyao replies, "My aim was very clear: I had to document the truth of history." Behind this statement is the sober understanding that any recollections of his would be regarded as "subjective" and subject to fabrication, unlike the "objective" recordings of the camera lens. Over the years,

9. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 305–6.

10. See *China Pictorial*, May 1969, 31. The photograph is reprinted, with the article, at www.morningsun.org/red/redfamily_cp_69.html.



Figure 3 Wang Jingyao, “Children Mourning Their Mother” (1966). Still image from Hu Jie, *Though I Am Gone*

he has also accumulated what he refers to throughout the film as “firsthand evidence”: from newspaper clippings of top government officials inciting violence to an anonymous letter (written with the left hand to alter the handwriting) by a teacher who witnessed the students’ brutal beating of his wife. Laying these items out along with other relics he had found in his wife’s bag after her death (a work unit ID card, a Little Red Book, and several pamphlets distributed by the Cultural Revolution Committee), Wang also tells the filmmaker that he had kept the urn containing his wife’s ashes inside his bookshelf for many years because there was nowhere to bury a “counterrevolutionary.” Most

shocking is that Wang has kept inside a suitcase the blood-spattered gauze from her mouth, the shirt on which students wrote “Down with,” and the pants stained when the beatings made her incontinent. These he opened for the first time in four decades for Hu Jie. In the earlier film about Lin Zhao, Hu Jie had also tracked down the young martyr’s physical remains — her ashes and a strand of half-white hair wrapped inside crumpled newspapers from the time before her death, from which one might still read “Long live Chairman Mao! Long live the Cultural Revolution!”

A logical continuity between these physical relics, Wang Jingyao’s photographs, and Hu Jie’s films corresponds to André Bazin’s “mummy complex” thesis, that the origin of the plastic arts may be a psychological defense against death, a desire for the real that was satisfied only with the development of photography, which “embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.”¹¹ In Chinese traditional beliefs, moreover, unburied physical remains also suggest that the souls of the dead are still wandering with sorrow and wrath, that justice has not yet been done, and that proper mourning has yet to take place.

The “proper place” for such relics should be the courtroom or the museum. Wang Jingyao, in any case, after the Cultural Revolution tried to file lawsuits

11. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1:9, 14, 15.



against the alleged leader of the mob responsible for his wife's death, but these were turned down under the pretext that "the prescribed time had passed," as if a fair trial were possible in that anarchic decade. If anything, Lin Zhao's story best illustrates the travesty of justice in that era, when the courts condemned her again and again for her "counterrevolutionary writings in blood" and "stubborn resistance to thought reform." The texts of those indictments against Lin Zhao and Bian Zhongyun appear to us today, of course, as reverse indictments of their writers and, in the case of Lin Zhao, as the most convincing evidence of her legendary martyrdom. Such "objective" evidences, complemented by passionate testimonies from witnesses, constitute the "exhibits" that the filmmaker presents to the jury, his audience. The films, in turn, are less like a court that follows existing gov-

Figure 4 "Red Family" (1969). Image courtesy of the Long Bow Group

ernmental legislation than a court that follows a more intuitive and conscientious sense of justice.

On a comparative note, these films also document personal and political historical practices — such as writing in blood and the inventory of photographic and material traces — that inadvertently mirror or anticipate aspects of Western conceptual art, such as Ann Mendieta’s use of her body as a medium for her works or Christian Boltanski’s “archival” work with photographs and other vestiges of the dead in ways that evoke what Ernst van Alphen calls “the Holocaust-effect.”¹² In the wake of the Holocaust, the Western art world has been extremely sensitive to fascist imagery and the aestheticization of historical catastrophes, so that artists who wish to engage with the Holocaust often become more like archivists or historians. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, however, Chinese artists today have won global fame and riches for their playful, subversive, and often nostalgic renderings of totalitarian iconography, which has not been balanced by serious, critical, and historical engagements with Maoist atrocities.¹³ Those pursuing the latter might be more hesitant to call their work “art” — one reason why Hu Jie turned from painting to documentary film as a representational mode that can do greater justice to memorialize those who perished.

The mode of testimony in Hu Jie’s cinematic treatment of the Cultural Revolution is remotely reminiscent of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). Like Lanzmann, Hu Jie revisits and accompanies his interviewees as they revisit the significant sites for the deceased. Traveling between the living and the dead and moving between the different places and voices in the films, the filmmaker is, as Shoshana Felman writes of Lanzmann,

continuously, though discreetly, present in the screen’s margin, perhaps as the most silently articulate, the most articulately silent, witness. The creator of the film speaks and testifies, however, in his own voice, in his triple role as the *narrator* of the film (and the signatory — the first person — of the script), as the *interviewer* of the witnesses (the solicitor and the receiver of the testimonies), and as the *inquirer* (the artist as the subject

12. I thank an anonymous reviewer at *Public Culture* for suggesting a comparison between Chinese and Western contemporary artistic engagements with historical atrocities. See Ernst van Alphen, “Deadly Historians: Boltanski’s Intervention in Holocaust Historiography,” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 45–73.

13. While I do not agree entirely with Jed Perl (“Mao Crazy,” *New Republic*, July 9, 2008) that contemporary Chinese art whitewashes Mao’s legacy, the darkest aspects of his totalitarian rule is definitely an undertreated subject in the currently exhibited artworks.

of a quest concerning what the testimonies testify to; the figure of the witness as a questioner, and of the asker not merely as a factual investigator but as the bearer of the film's philosophical address and inquiry.¹⁴

As a narrator, Hu Jie makes a onetime appearance at the very beginning of *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul* by filming himself in a mirror. This inclusion of his own image aligns him with the film's other witnesses who agreed to be on camera. At the end of both *Though I Am Gone* and *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul*, Hu Jie lists only his name in the credits—those who helped him preferred to remain anonymous—thus taking sole responsibility for such a potentially risky initiative. He also lends his own voice to reading out Lin Zhao's writing at many points in the film, serving as a medium for her own brutally suppressed voice. As an interviewer, Hu Jie, like Lanzmann, asks more for descriptions and concrete details, such as the weather, the colors of clothing, last words, and gestures, than for explanations. The interviews are almost always conducted in the interviewees' homes, with the curtains drawn, their faces only dimly lit by whatever light remains. Such haphazard elements of the *mise-en-scène* become markers of the film's authenticity and underground status, but they are not immune to allegorical readings. In one testimony an old classmate reads one of Lin Zhao's letters while sitting in front of a bookshelf, where books are stacked horizontally with their pages and not their spines facing outward. Such an untidy habit must have formed over the years, caused by the need to conceal, not display, one's readings, a necessary camouflage of paper to preserve Lin Zhao's letter to this day.

Like Lanzmann, Hu Jie takes his audience on a quest of knowledge and meaning, though he is much more reverent than critical. Pilgrimage and mourning characterize his stance better than investigation and cross-examination. The discursive spaces of his films are thus closer to museums and monuments and shrines than to the courtroom, unless we think of the multiple Christian references in his two films as appealing to a higher form of judgment. Moreover, while Lanzmann's nine-hour epic systematically refuses to use archival footage, Hu Jie readily inserts whatever archival footage he could find as iconic illustrations of more generic historical testimonies. In fact, little archival footage of the Cultural Revolution is publicly available, and what does circulate is often of terrible quality. Adopting a practice typical of Chinese television, Hu Jie sometimes fills in the visual vacuum of long verbose sequences with *ambience* shots: Tiananmen

14. Shoshana Felman, "Film as Witness: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," in *Holocaust Remembrance*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), 100.

Square architecture to illustrate governmental power, idyllic images of boatmen on canals to signify the city of Suzhou. These weak, conventional elements have been significantly reduced in *Though I Am Gone* and in the newly updated version of *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul* (2006).

Hu Jie also has a penchant for nondiegetic sentimental visual and musical motifs in his films. For instance, in the sequence on Lin Zhao's execution, Hu Jie crosscuts the cross on top of a church with a white handkerchief flying against a blue-sky backdrop to the accompaniment of Christian choral music. With the sudden sound of a gunshot, the handkerchief is stained red, by ink meant to represent blood. Rather than reject such sentimentality point-blank, however, I would argue that expressions of the filmmaker's subjectivity, if used sparsely and discreetly, could be signatures of a powerful personal documentary style. The climax of both films, as noted earlier, is the unveiling of the material remains of the dead, from Bian Zhongyun's stained clothes to Lin Zhao's white hair. Shot with a handheld camera, dramatic zoom-ins and zoom-outs not only augment visibility but enhance the hapticity of objects and convey the filmmaker's own emotions. In both films, nondiegetic music—a Christian choral piece in the case of Lin Zhao and a famous song of martyrdom from the *Yellow River Cantata* in the case of Bian Zhongyun (because it was her favorite song)—is inserted to hallow these abject relics, a requiem for those who have not died in peace. These climatic sequences are among many examples of imbrication between the objects of history and the subjectivities of the filmmaker and other witnesses.

However intimately Hu Jie's camera approaches its historical subjects, he is ever mindful and constantly reminds us of gaps and continuities between past and present—in other words, of his and our own historicity. Given that amnesia is enforced by the state, it is not surprising that today many Chinese are oblivious of the passion and the bloodshed that once transpired in the sites of their everyday lives. After a reading of Lin Zhao's appeal to God not to let her lose her mind after a brutal beating by the prison guards—allegedly written with her blood on the prison wall and later transcribed to paper—Hu Jie films a group of old women, who would have been Lin Zhao's age if she had lived, doing morning exercises in the park, singing a tune in unison: “[I want] a nose job, double-eyelids, and red lips; a washing machine with double tubs; a refrigerator with three doors; a color TV with remote control.” As their voices fade out, Hu Jie's voice-over resurfaces: “Nobody working for the prison agreed to be interviewed.” Today's China has moved on from communist to capitalist ideals, but silence about the Cultural Revolution persists, perpetuated not only by the unwillingness of those

in power to come to terms with the past but also by those in fear of power. Hu Jie found the anonymous teacher who in a letter to Wang Jingyao many years ago wrote down a testimony of Bian Zhongyun's death, but she did not want him to use recordings of her voice or image, because "it is not yet time to speak out." Not everyone wants to or should become a martyr, after all, and it is the responsibility of the filmmaker to respect the limits of testimony and to share its burdens with his audience, viewers who could, each in his or her own limited way, push the limits of silence.

