

Refusing Amnesia: A Conversation with Gao Wenqian on *Though I am Gone*



***Though I am Gone* (2006)**
Director, Editor & Camera: Hu Jie
Running Time: 68 minutes
(Mandarin with English subtitles)

Sharon Hom discusses Hu Jie's documentary and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution with Gao Wenqian, HRIC's Chinese Editor-in-Chief. Gao was previously an associate research fellow and editor-in-chief at the Research Center on Party Literature for the Communist Party of China. He is the author of *Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary*, and received an Asian Pacific Award for the Japanese edition.

From 1966 to 1976, China underwent a decade of terror, fear, and chaos during the Cultural Revolution unleashed by Mao. *Though I am Gone*, by documentary filmmaker Hu Jie, looks at the violent death of Bian Zhongyun, a vice principal of Beijing Normal University Attached Girls' Middle School. Teacher Bian's death was the first, but was followed by millions of other victims who were beaten, tortured, or persecuted to death by zealous Red Guards. More than 40 years after the Cultural Revolution was launched, the Chinese leaders are still suppressing critical reflection and accountability, and remain intent on enforcing a collective historical amnesia.

Time, memory, and death are made painfully visible in the documentary's opening sequence. The ticking of a clock as backdrop to a visual alternating between the past and the present: between the murdered teacher, Bian Zhongyun; the camera's eye staring out at us, the viewers; and Wang Jingyao, her husband. The filmmaker's camera closes in on the old camera in Wang Jingyao's hand. The credits and title appear—*Though I am Gone*—Wang Jingyao looks out at us, shots of Teacher Bian's battered corpse, close up of Wang trying to remember, a shot of her corpse again. The interview

begins, and a voice asks, *Was it hard to take pictures of your wife's corpse?* He answers, *Of course, but I want to record history. This is evidence.*

SH: Watching this film from our two different perspectives and backgrounds, I was aware of what a difficult experience it must be for you, since you actually lived through the Cultural Revolution. Even for me, it was painful to be a witness—although a mediated one—to the terror, violence, and death. And it wasn't just Teacher Bian—there were millions after her. Her death was just the beginning.

GWQ: Yes—the hysteria, violence, and blood in the documentary are not foreign to me. I was an eyewitness to the Cultural Revolution. I was thirteen at the time. And after I watched the film, my first thought was, I can't bear to remember this.

Even after you gave the documentary to me to watch, I kept putting it off. Why? Because I lived through it. Because of my personal experience, after so many years, it is still a wound to the heart. The wounds may seem to have closed, but watching the film was like reopening them. Watching it brought me back to those years where I experienced the Cultural Revolution.

This documentary has a lot of history to it. That was the wildest and most frenetic period in modern Chinese history. You can see how bloody and violent and fearful the environment was back then.

When I was watching it, I took especial note of the expressions in people's eyes. There were two expressions that were particularly meaningful—the sincere expression of the pure and young people who really believed in what they were doing (even as they were beating and torturing others)—they were so convinced that they were right. The second expression I noticed was fear—those who recoiled at the sight of the beatings but were scared, and did not speak out.

Bian was not like the other teachers. She was the vice principal of the school, and she was a Party leader there. Why were the students in the documentary so cruel? Because they had been raised on “wolf's milk.” When I say “wolf's milk,” I am referring to the Communist Party

culture of indoctrinating youth with hateful thoughts. In our generation, there is a very famous saying, “Living in the new China, we grow up under the red flag.” The Communists taught even the very young to hate, and continued to instill hatred in them as they grew up.

The Party divided people into different categories—if you were categorized as the enemy, no mercy would be shown to you. The Lei Feng way of thought that Mao had established has a saying that goes: You must be as ruthless to your enemies as the harshest winter. And so, as the students increasingly viewed Bian as the enemy, they became merciless towards her. They beat Bian to death in the most inhumane manner. This was a result of the long-term indoctrination of hatred that the Communist Party endorsed.

It was also a competition to see who could be the most revolutionary. Those who did not beat her were seen as not being as revolutionary as those who did. Cruelty became a sign of your loyalty to the cause of revolution.

Why did Mao Zedong do this? He just used the students as weapons to strike down his opponents. He took blank pages and painted them with hate, brainwashing naïve, young, pure students (teenagers mostly). He planted these seeds of hatred in the Red Guards. They were incited to enact violence against their enemies.

SH: That is a very powerful phrase—being raised on wolf’s milk. Yet there were those who did not buy into the ideology, like you. Why was this, when everyone else was being brainwashed? How is it possible for people all drinking wolf’s milk and exposed to the same propaganda to act, to think differently?

GWQ: Each person is different because of family, environment, or personality. When I was six years old, my father was labeled as an “enemy of the Party.” In 1959, my family was kicked out of our house. So by the time the Cultural Revolution started, we were already suspicious and doubtful of its tenets. The suffering of those who were persecuted in the Cultural Revolution was already familiar to me.

However, there were also those who fell in the middle (not to either extreme of being either revolutionary or

enemy class) and for them, the Cultural Revolution became an opportunity to express and develop their revolutionary fervor.

SH: If one person witnesses two students beating teachers—or 100 students beating a teacher, in the second situation, there arises a kind of mob mentality that intimidates and makes any witness less likely to speak out.

GWQ: When I saw people being beaten, I felt shaky inside. But I didn’t tell people to stop, and I didn’t speak up to tell them that it was wrong. Even though people were destroying each other, their families, themselves, it was so rare for someone to stand up and say that it is wrong.

The person who was responsible for starting all this was Mao Zedong. In the documentary, there is the infamous scene showing Song Binbin, a fervent young Red Guard, meeting Mao for the first time. When Mao asked her name, Song replied politely, Binbin. But Mao exhorted: The Revolution does not want Binbin to be polite! Be Violent!

It was not Mao Zedong who physically persecuted or killed hundreds of thousands of people. Mao did not order Teacher Bian to be beaten to death. But it was through a series of things he did that ordinary people became so vicious and turned on one another.

SH: Throughout this process, from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution—there was a steady intensification in rhetoric. There was rhetoric condemning others as the enemy, and rhetoric casting others as demons, monsters, inciting and calling for violence. This rhetoric of violence is tragically not unique to China—it was used in Rwanda also, where an entire ethnic group was labeled as cockroaches, not even human. So what you describe as Chinese Communist Party culture, and this rhetoric of violence denying a group its humanity, has been historically used by dominant powerful groups to suppress, murder, or exploit others all over the world, for example genocide in Rwanda, slavery in America, or apartheid in South Africa. This is the danger when you start dehumanizing people.

Atrocities occurred under the Communist flag, but similar scenarios happen around the world. It's really a mixture of power and fear that allows these terrible things to happen. I have to ask myself—if I had lived back then and witnessed those brutal things, would I have helped those being beaten? Would I have had the guts to stand up to them, or take the risks like the priests and others who hid people in Rwanda from the butchery at risk of their own lives? I am just grateful that I have not had to stand that test.

GWQ: Nobody stood up. It was fear. If the Communist Party said anything against you—it was over. They dehumanized their enemies. And afterwards, they prohibited any public discussion on the Anti-Rightists movement and the Cultural Revolution, and tightly controlled information on the Revolution. The whole nation “lost” its memories of the Cultural Revolution, lapsing into a collective historical amnesia. But to understand the present, you have to first understand the past.

SH: Yes, and you have to understand the past to know how to act in the present—so that there is a possibility for an alternative future.

GWQ: After Mao died, the Communist Party did acknowledge that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake. Yet they still forbid people from talking about it. Even though Mao is dead, the Communist Party has used the same medicine, but under a different label. They need to preserve their legitimacy. For example, the Shi Tao case, the Guo Feixiong case—the reasons for all those cases are the same: the Communist Party does not want people to truly understand history.

SH: In mainland China today, there is no possibility for ordinary people to reflect on their national history. Overseas, there are processes of transitional justice (such as in South Africa) where perpetrators and victims can speak about their experiences and confront one another. Perpetrators have to admit, “This is what I did,” and give details, and apologize. Participating in this process sometimes allows them to avoid criminal prosecution. This process may not always be successful, forgiveness is complex, but it's a start. This kind of process, of collective memory, responsibility, opening the way to healing, is something I've thought that

China could explore, but the attempts to totally censor the past during the 40th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution made it clear: this process of healing cannot even start.

GWQ: There are two reasons why this would be difficult in China. First of all, the conditions don't exist for this—the Party would not allow this. Mao's corpse is still in Tiananmen. The Communist Party is willing to go after the small perpetrators but not the big ones.

The second reason is the refusal of ordinary civilians to acknowledge past wrongs committed. There are a few exceptions, such as the anonymous person who witnessed the murder of Teacher Bian and wrote to Wang Jingyao—that was a brave act. But that was the limit of courage. That person was not willing to talk about it even now, and is still afraid to be interviewed on camera.

The Revolution has been over for forty years, but it is still rare to find former Red Guards who are willing to engage in self-introspection and reflect upon the things they did. This has to do with traditional Chinese culture, which does not advocate repentance and confession. In this way, Chinese culture is very different from Western culture.

SH: This is the enduring power of the fear, even 40 years on. There were some themes of the documentary—the theme of time—time of now, the time of 40 years ago. I think that the film was very conscious about time passing. The second theme was something we already discussed—how did the process become so increasingly violent, and then explode so terribly?

And finally, what remains—those family members left behind—silent witnesses then but speaking out after 40 years, revealing the truth, and excavating the preserved evidence: the old suitcase, the photos, the contents of Teacher Bian's bag, Mao's little red book, all the revolutionary pamphlets—the tangible last remains of a life—her school ID badge, strands of hair, her torn blood stained shirt and soiled pants, and her watch, stopped at 3:40 when the terror began and ended.

GWQ: The shot of the clock stopping at 3:40 holds great significance. It wasn't just time that stopped during the

Revolution—the system had also stopped. The Chinese political system was exposed for its phony superficial changes. It may have shifted in its form during then, but underneath, its essence was still the same. The Communist Party still controlled everything. The stopped clock is a symbol of a frozen Chinese political system that has not changed.

Yet, although China may currently be transitioning from a totalitarian society to a post-totalitarian society, the authorities' rule still depends upon their interpretation of history, and this interpretation is built upon lies. They have covered up China's historical and present problems with falsehoods. And just like the child in the Hans Christian Andersen story "The Emperor's New Clothes," the masses do not dare to expose the lies because they live in a climate of fear. What really struck me was the fact that the anonymous letter-writer in the documentary risked persecution in writing the letter that year, but still cannot stand up publicly and talk about it 40 years on. The Revolution ate its own children and created a tragedy, but there is not enough reflection about it. We can't forget the human cost.

During the Velvet Revolution, Vaclav Havel exhorted the Czech people to follow their consciences, speak the truth, and refuse to forget, saying that this was the "power of the powerless." In the documentary, Wang Jingyao took the bloody clothes of his wife and put them in a leather suitcase. He has slept with this suitcase under his bed for 40 years. This is his refusal to forget.

The power that the ordinary people have is, as Havel said, to resist lies, refuse amnesia and tell the truth. If each person adhered to this philosophy, we could influence our families, our friends, and our society. We could tear down the lies that have preserved this totalitarian system. The day we all vanquish the fear inside our hearts is the day that the Communist regime will collapse.

In Search of a Breath of Fresh Air

A Review of *Reflections of Leadership: Tung Chee Hwa and Donald Tsang 1997–2007*

**By Christine Loh and Carine Lai
Civic Exchange Hong Kong, June 2007
303 pages**

By Jonathan Mirsky



This well-documented and convincing deconstruction of the two men who have ruled Hong Kong on behalf of Beijing since July 1997 reminds us how a city of remarkable citizens can survive and even thrive despite leadership worse than it deserves.

I state immediately that I know the principal author, Christine Loh, as well as Tung Chee Hwa and Donald Tsang. Ms. Loh and Mr. Tsang are also both good friends.

Ms. Loh, one of the most admired women in Hong Kong and at one time a star of its Legislative Council, is the founder of the non-profit think tank Civic Exchange, which lobbies on public issues such as Hong Kong's environment and its need for representative government. Carine Lai works for Civic Exchange and is a well-known political cartoonist.

The essence of this admirably expressed book (Ms. Loh's best-written to date) is that while Mr. Tung and Mr. Tsang could not be more different in background and personality, both distrust democracy and are out of touch with the convictions and hopes of Hong Kong people. The book relies on copious quotations from speeches and policy statements of both men. Since both they and their speechwriters command clear English, there can be no doubt about what was on their minds.

The authors underscore that for both Mr. Tung and Mr. Tsang, the demands of their masters in Beijing were and remain paramount. From the time of Deng Xiaoping, Beijing's leaders have suspected Hong Kong people of disloyalty. This suspicion arose when Hong Kong residents demonstrated in huge numbers against the Tiananmen killings in 1989, and again in 2003 when