
AN INDIVIDUAL ARCHIVE AND A HISTORICAL ERA

By Du Gao

An individual's political archive is unearthed and turns up for sale at an antiques market. Du Gao reflects on reliving his experiences in administrative detention as a "Rightist" through the discovery of these documents.

When I entered our conference room today, my mind was far from calm.

Though some people would compel us to forget, even forbidding us to reminisce, here we are. Our presence here is an expression of a historical spirit and attitude toward history. I come with a sincere heart and a sense of responsibility to later generations. Though the disaster we are remembering happened 50 years ago, it is a painful thing for me to be here. I did not come to mourn my destroyed youth, however, but so that later generations, our successors, will not have their youth destroyed.

I think of my fellow sufferers, who died tragically, and thinking of them, the tears come. My tears are not just for the unfortunate dead, but for our ill-fated people.

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As for my own political experiences, from the 1950s—the Anti-Hu Feng Campaign, the Campaign against Hidden Counterrevolutionaries,¹ the Anti-Rightist Movement—to my 12-year stint of Reeducation-Through-Labor (RTL), up until the Anti-Rightist issue

was put right in 1979, I experienced a full 24 years of hardship, a whole era of tribulation. Then at the end of the 20th century came the amazing appearance of *The Du Gao Archive*, an extraordinary historical legacy of those extraordinary years of my life.

It is inconceivable that an individual political archive as complete as this has become available to people in China, an artifact sold in an antiques market. The Chinese archive system is kept under extremely close surveillance, and after the Cultural Revolution and the rectification of the Anti-Rightist issue, all such data on these campaigns was burned. It never crossed my mind that only my own archive, out of all the others, would not just survive unscathed, but actually appear in Beijing for commercial sale in a well-known antiques market. It was discovered and bought by the young scholar Li Hui. This is a miracle. This archive has followed me for 24 years, nearly a quarter of a century. For me, it is both mysterious and frightening. Naturally, when I first came face to face with this archive, laden with the dust of history, I was shaken to my soul.

My archive allowed me to see the “secrets” behind the political campaigns. The Special Task Force secret reports to the higher-ups, the leaders’ instructions, the prompts prepared for the criticism speech by the Special Task Force during the Anti-Rightist Movement, and so on. For the first time, I truly understood the way in which these movements for the brutal destruction of an individual, an innocent youth, were planned out in advance, how injustice was perpetrated.

In 2004, Mr. Li Hui brought out the original text of the archive under the title *A Desolation in Paper*, published by Literature Publishing House [*Zhongguo Wenlian Chubanshe*]. I wrote a book titled *Yesterday Revisited*,

which was published in the Century Life series by the October Literature and Art Publishing House in Beijing. These two titles drew a lot of attention from intellectual circles in China and overseas.

I have to say frankly that making this individual archive public taxed my determination, and brought a fresh dose of spiritual torment. It was not my intention to conceal myself. I was willing to lay bare all that was insupportable, my own humiliations, errors and disgrace, to uncover the truth of who I was in that historical environment and show it to the world. I wanted to restore the truth of history.

I am grateful that I have not been laughed at or despised; readers have not found the books unbearable. People understand me, even sympathize with me, because in me they come to know a historical era. The reasonableness and goodness of contemporary readers has moved me deeply.

What I had not expected was that the archive that has been published is not my archive in its entirety: one volume is missing. This volume was collected by a linguist, Mr. Li Jiang, a permanent resident of Australia, who found it in the Beijing Panjiayuan Antiques Market in the late 1990s and took it back to Australia with him. When he saw the two books which had been published in China, he visited me during his Spring Festival trip in 2007 to show me the contents of the volume and a partial copy.

That volume contains 97 documents of various kinds from my RTL period, over 250 pages of over 100,000 Chinese characters. It includes the criminal intake form with my fingerprints and palm print, along with the mug shot numbered 0115 on April 18, 1954, when I was taken from the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) offices by Beijing Public Security. It also includes 21 items reporting on and exposing me, 18 transcripts from criticism meetings and reform evaluation meetings, as well as ten other items of various kinds. The final item is from November 4, 1969, a report regarding my request for work to the local police station after I was sent back from the RTL farm to my original residence.

This volume was a record of my entire RTL experience, an important missing part of the already-published Du Gao archive, and includes several items from informants, deadly attacks on me. I never thought I would be seeing the actual documents 50 years on.

In April 1961, for example, when I had been in RTL for three years, the public security bureau announced that my punishment would be extended another three years. The warden berated me. He said someone exposed me as having called the prison staff “Czarist turnkeys.” I was powerless to defend myself. All I could do was confess, head down, and accept my punishment. And now I was looking at the original of this terrible report.

Again, among the reports on the RTL team in August 1966, following the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the focus of the material was their exposure by an informant for circulating a hand-copied novel written by Zhang Zhihua, a Rightist student from the Chinese Department at Beijing University. Zhang had escaped from the RTL farm, wandered as far as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and then fled secretly to Shanghai, where he saw his classmate, Lin Zhao (later secretly executed during the Cultural Revolution). Lin Zhao was suffering from a serious illness at the time and was on medical parole from prison. Zhang Zhihua had one last long conversation with her. Not long afterward, Zhang was captured and returned to the farm. He was put in solitary confinement, where he set down in a notebook this moving record of his life as a fugitive. Zhang Zhihua was a youth with a great literary talent and his work was circulating secretly among us. The day the warden discovered it, the whole company was already out working; only a few on sick leave were left behind. I happened to be on sick leave myself that day. The work team office had tasked me with writing a play as a piece of propaganda for Mao Zedong Thought. I lay at the head of the *kang*² writing, my manuscript pages scattered all over its surface and the notebook of Zhang Zhihua’s novel hidden beneath my pages. The inspection didn’t find it and I gave it back to Zhang Zhihua. What we didn’t know was that this maneuver had been seen by someone else on sick leave. This informant wrote a secret report exposing me and gave it to the company office. When I saw that report in my archive, I felt deeply wounded all over again. In that

cruel environment, those in charge of reform manipulated human weakness, mobilizing the Rightist prisoners to expose each other and strike out at each other. It was a terrifying method of control.

We can now say, following the discovery of the missing volume, that we have the Du Gao archive, complete in about 500,000 characters. To date, it is the only original individual archive of a Rightist that has not been changed in any way. History is specific. The essence of history can only be known through the fate of persons. Precisely because this is so, the Du Gao archive is the most dependable textual basis for knowing a historical era.

I read a number of reviews of *A Desolation in Paper* and *Yesterday Revisited* following their publication. Readers felt the archive provided an indispensable “historical testimony” for research and understanding of the method and mechanism of political control in Chinese society during the latter half of the 20th century. In the archival system, for example, one file can determine an individual’s political fate. That person has no right to know the details, but can only follow the “organization’s” ruling. The RTL system, another example, in fact is no different from the type of Reform-Through-Labor to which convicts are subjected in prison. Any unit of the national judicial organs, other major bodies such as those of the Party and government, and even minor bodies, the so-called mass groups, schools, stores—can all arbitrarily use authoritarian powers to put an innocent person in jail without judicial process.

Readers will see how—when the Hu Feng incident broke in 1955—anyone who had read Hu Feng’s books was, without exception, forced to confess and examine their thinking, and some were investigated. Simply because one of the writers in the Hu Feng clique, Lu Ling, was my colleague and good friend, I was locked up and “investigated in isolation,” losing my freedom for a year and seven months. All of my personal books and papers and my diary were confiscated and examined. Morning and night, I was “investigated and denounced,” the Special Task Force bombarded me with questions and used a “forced confession” to coerce a complete admission of guilt. They introduced authoritarian violence into the lives of everyday peo-

ple and attacked ordinary people as if they were enemies.

There is an abundance of material in the book on the Campaign against Hidden Counterrevolutionaries, all investigating the friendship and contact between myself and several young friends. This was aimed at uncovering a small clique, suspected of being filthy counterrevolutionaries. Today we would see our friendship as part of the completely mundane everyday lives of young people, particularly young people involved in the arts. But in that totalitarian age, this was not to be allowed. Except for Party youth organizations, there was an extreme dread of any sort of group. During the Campaign against Hidden Counterrevolutionaries, all sorts of small cliques were uncovered nationwide. My friends and I were charged with being the “Little Family” clique. An investigation of our every word and action, all our written work, was expanded into an investigation into our entire histories, from which the conclusion was drawn that all this was counterrevolutionary in nature. Included in the archive are materials written by the Special Task Force during the Anti-Rightist Movement for internal circulation, “A Compilation of Materials Concerning the ‘Little Family,’” and “Prompts for the Speeches at the Debate on the ‘Little Family.’” The latter were meant to compel the people to follow a premeditated format, and subsume the small clique into Wu Zuguang’s “Second-Class Court”³ in order to mount a big criticism. This is a classic example of the kind of thing that happened.

This makes it clear that in those authoritarian times, an individual might not only be accused of a crime because of thought or speech; even young people’s most basic rights in life might be interfered with and trampled. The human personality was stifled, and friendship, family affection, love, and fellowship were taboo, subject to being charged as corrupt bourgeois behavior. People’s lives had to conform to one standard, they were assembled into one organization. Only love for the one leader was permitted and thought had to be unified. This was the overwhelming hallmark of political control in that era as it is vividly set out in the archive.

What readers feel worst about are the great number of so-called “confession materials,” the “informant

reports,” the “confessions,” the “exposés,” “reports,”—some were exposés and confessions my friends and I had no choice but to write during the Anti-Hu Feng and Anti-Rightist campaigns; some were attacks and false charges made against me in the workplace by colleagues wishing to express their political activism; some were the mutual attacks and back-biting among the inmates of the RTL team. These all seem to be individual initiatives, but in fact all took place at the prompting and coercion of the organization. This kind of manipulation was widespread in political life. You get me today; they’ll get you tomorrow. The names in my archive were those of leaders of the campaigns and activists. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, hardly any of them escaped an even more tragic end. People ask: What, in the end, is the point of setting a nation, a society, a people at each other’s throats like this, creating mutual hatred and universal insecurity?

The record provided in my archive of the three years of famine following the Great Leap Forward in 1959, the hardship experienced by the RTL inmates and Rightists, the tragedy of their suffering and death, is frightening and soul-shattering. Some essays have referred to my “two *wowotou* incident”⁴ to describe the destruction of the spirit and personal dignity of intellectuals in that brutal environment. It happened in the days of starvation in the winter of 1960. It was my task to serve out the food. It happened that one person did not come and so there were two *wowotou* left over. I didn’t return them to the kitchen immediately; I had the idea of eating them myself. But I didn’t dare. Just then the warden discovered these two errant *wowotou* and questioned me about them. I immediately made an oral report, but he wasn’t through with me. He called a small group meeting, mobilizing the RTL convicts to expose and criticize me and ordered me to make a written report. On the eve of that great famine year 1960, while an armed guard stood outside the iron gates of the prison dormitory, I lay on the *kang* under the dim lights and flagellated my soul, word by word, making a full confession of the criminal at the bottom of my heart. I criticized my “shamefulness,” my “vileness,” my “rapaciousness,”—right down to my “anti-the-people” class nature, from my bourgeois individualism to my exploiter’s consciousness—the record of the small group meeting criticism and my written report are all

present in my archive as evidence of my crime. My self-examination is four pages of small, closely-written characters. The first three pages are included in *A Desolation in Paper*. The final page has now been discovered in that final volume of the archive in Australia.

In the end, the experience of a long sentence of captivity, of devastation and torment, warps one’s vitality and dignity. One’s personality is crushed to pieces by a terrifying political vehicle.

One critic wrote of it: “Having read to this point, how can one not be horrified? From this little farce, one can roughly imagine the setting. Those who have never lived in such an environment are quite naturally unable to imagine or respond to it. So when you study or critique this period of history, please have a greater understanding of those who have suffered to the utmost. Do not make fun of their weakness and submission, or blame them for their failure to take action.”⁵ As I mentioned earlier, this is the reasonableness and goodness of contemporary readers that moved me so deeply.

In the end, the experience of a long sentence of captivity, of devastation and torment, warps one’s vitality and dignity. One’s personality is crushed to pieces by a terrifying political vehicle. In my archive, there are phrases the reader will often encounter: “apology to Chairman Mao,” “begging Chairman Mao’s forgiveness,” “What I have learned from studying the great works of Chairman Mao.” Such self-criticisms—what people call “prostrating oneself before the reformers,” “abusing oneself, expressing remorse, praising the great ones; being indebted to the graciousness of the leader”—these are slave-like attempts at vindication, the product of the era of the personality cult. I must swear myself to slavery so the order releasing me from RTL can be bestowed upon me.

As I have said, after 12 years of forced reform inside an electrified grid, I am no longer “me.” From a vibrant youth I have become “one wise in the ways of the world, one who has learned to deal with his surroundings,

expressionless, an old, decrepit man tormented by poverty, someone who appears to be pathetically honest but within is constantly forcing down his emotions, a charlatan.”⁶

Those in power might see this as a “victory” of thought reform; but for an individual, it is a thorough eradication of the self.

This is how the essence of a historical era in this way determined the human fate of an intellectual. My case is not the most tragic among the 550,000 Rightists; there are millions whose fate was more tragic than mine. Have all their archives been incinerated? We should seek further “historical testimonies” and preserve them for future generations.

Today, 50 years later, the skies of history still reverberate with the calls for democracy, freedom and rule of law that enlightened people made 50 years ago. Today, however, democratic concepts and appeals are more specifically modern in their formulation. Chinese politicians and intellectuals should stand on the heights of the new century, reflect deeply on history, and push China toward more rapid democratization.

But because Chinese traditional culture lacks a habit of penitence, China’s politicians have always seen it as humiliation and have lacked the courage to admit their own historical errors. They will never willingly apologize to their victims. This makes today’s symposium even more significant. I hope it will produce a positive effect on the progress of historical reflection and political culture in China.

Zhang Kangkang, a writer of keen insight, responded to the publication of *Yesterday Revisited* saying, “The par-

ticular message we find here is a people which does not excel ‘today’ at interrogating ‘yesterday’ has no ‘tomorrow.’”

How well she puts it. Allow me to close my speech with her words. Thank you all.

Translated by J. Latourelle

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Notes

1. The Sufan campaign, 1955–57.
2. *Kang* refers to a brick-bed common in northern China.
3. *Erliutang* [Second-Class Court] is the name given to a group of artists and writers.
4. A kind of steamed corn bun, which in those days provided little nutrition.
5. Dan Chen, “Weile Mingtian—Guanyu Du Gao de *You Jian Zhuotian*” [For Tomorrow—on Du Gao’s *Yesterday Revisited*], *Mingbao Yuekan* [Ming Pao Monthly], December 2004, <http://www.mingpaomonthly.com/cfm/Archive2.cfm?File=200412/book/01a.txt>.
6. Du Gao, *Yesterday Revisited* (Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2004), 193.