

FILM

The first death of the Cultural Revolution

Posted by Jeremy Goldkorn, April 5, 2007 07:25 PM



Schoolgirls, before the rampage

From the Letters from China blog:

The first casualty of Cultural Revolution

(http://voyage.typepad.com/china/2007/04/the_first_casua.html)

Cultural Revolution Documentary Nominated - Yunnan Film Festival Cancelled

... Just before the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (<http://www.yunfest.org/>), the Organising Committee suddenly issued a notice on 26 March saying the film festival was ordered to suspend and the committee was still communicating with the relevant departments. Sources say the suspension is the result of the nomination of documentary "Though I am Gone" (我虽死去).

"Though I am Gone" was directed by Hu Jie, an independent film maker. The documentary is about Bian Zhongyan, the first teacher who was beaten to death by the Red Guards in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution.

- translated from the *Apple Daily*

Danwei contacted the organizers of the festival: they said they did not yet know when they would be able to reschedule it.

Nonetheless, you can still watch "Though I am Gone" — the entire film is on Youtube in ten parts: http://www.youtube.com/profile_videos?user=Layla1968

In the film, the story of Bian's death is told by various eye witnesses, including her colleagues, one of her daughters, and her husband Wang Jingyao. Wang took photographs of her body after she was killed, of big character posters condemning her, and has kept other kinds of documentation and evidence such as her bloodstained clothes. The film also includes archival footage of radio broadcasts announcing the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Bian Zhongyun was the principal of the Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University. She was beaten to death by girl Red Guards who were students at her school. They used wooden clubs, spiked with nails. The school was an elite institution and many of the students were children or relatives of senior government officials. Bian was one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution, on the fifth of the Bloody August of 1966, and her brutal treatment set the tone for the madness that

followed.

Watching the film is a harrowing experience. It seems that the authorities in Kunming that shut down Yunnan Festival would prefer to 'harmonize' such experiences out of existence.

UPDATE: A correction from Geremie Barmé:

She definitely was not the first person to die in the Cultural Revolution, though her death was notorious. Interestingly, she died I believe from exhaustion rather than beating, and the ironies surrounding her demise are many.

UPDATE 2: Another film by Hu Jie with similar subject matter is on Youtube: *Looking for the soul of Lin Zhao* (http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=9BC28F2D06F8EA63). Lin sent a letter to Mao Zedong about Peng Dehuai, the army commander who was denounced because he criticized Mao's Great Leap Forward policies. Lin was executed as a counter-revolutionary in Shanghai in 1968.

There is an interview with Hu Jie about his documentary work at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com>.

There are currently 3 Comments for The first death of the Cultural Revolution.

i went to this festival in 2005 and it is still one of my favorite cultural events i've experienced in china.

Posted by: **chris** April 6, 2007 04:48 PM

I just finished watching "Though I Am Gone." It is one of the most powerful and tragic movies I have ever seen. It deserves world attention, most of all the attention of the Chinese people.

Ironically, perhaps, I watched it in my small apartment in Shenzhen where my girlfriend and her mother, who is visiting Shenzhen from Dandong, were also.

Her mother was the same age as the Beijing Middle School Red Guard girls during the Cultural Revolution and in one brief shining moment of candor last year said she had been at the same Beijing rally where Sung Bing-bing put the armband on Mao. She rarely, if ever, talks about the Cultural Revolution. Kind of like the older Germans who won't talk about what they did or didn't do during WWII.

I asked them if they wanted to watch it. My girlfriend was momentarily interested but after about 2 minutes said it was "too sad" followed by "Why are foreigners so interested in these topics, anyway?" Her mother made no reply but later said she thought what she had heard (she didn't watch) of Though I Am Gone through the half open door was probably "exaggerated ... made up."

Posted by: **justin** April 7, 2007 05:12 PM

I thought it was an amazing film. A good illustration of the dangers of mass hysteria and/or crowd mentality.

Posted by: **Garth** April 10, 2007 11:39 AM