

Film Tells Story of Fearless Lawyer Who Stood Up for the Persecuted Amid CCP's Tyranny

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A web banner for the NTD film "Where Are You." Courtesy of Gan Jing World



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Commentary

A new feature film based on the life of an acclaimed human rights lawyer captures the sacrifices one man made in standing up for justice and truth in the face of the Chinese communist regime's tyranny.

“Where Are You” starts off gently and draws you in, before packing a punch that awakens both a sense of fear and powerlessness, and a yearning for justice that resides within most human hearts.



The film opens in Toronto, where a young woman named Lucy is looking for her husband and is interviewed for a Chinese television show. It is during the Mid-Autumn Festival, traditionally a time for Chinese families to be together.

The television host asks Lucy who she is searching for. The film revolves through flashbacks to tell the story of Lucy's husband Gao Li, a human rights lawyer missing in China, and how she came to flee China to live in Canada.

We learn that Gao came from a poor family, but from a young age learned traditional Chinese ethical values that mirror Christian teachings. He recalls that his mother told him, “If someone comes to you for help, it is because you're the one who should help them.”

The film is based on the true [story of Gao Zhisheng](#), a human rights lawyer who went missing from his home in northern China's Shaanxi Province in August 2017 and hasn't been seen or heard from since. By that time, Gao had already been subjected to ongoing harassment, house arrest, imprisonment, and torture by Chinese police.

Gao's wife, Geng He (Lucy in the film), fled China to the United States with their two children in 2009, where she continues working to get information on Gao's whereabouts and to find out whether he is even still alive.

Gao, a self-taught lawyer and devoted Christian, began practicing law in 1996, defending victims of draconian government measures as well

as persecuted Christians and practitioners of Falun Gong (also called Falun Dafa), a spiritual cultivation practice in the Buddhist tradition that has been brutally persecuted in China since July 1999.

Although Gao knew he would face the wrath of the Beijing regime by taking on human rights cases that expose the regime's failure to follow its own laws and constitution, he still helped those in need.

In the film, Gao defends a young man who is on trial for saying publicly that [the self-immolation incident](#) on Tiananmen Square in January 2001 alleged to involve Falun Gong practitioners was staged by the regime to defame the practice. He implores the court to apply justice and not the charge of "inciting subversion of State power" under article 105 of China's Criminal Law. When the court ignores Gao's appeal and sentenced the man to 20 years in prison anyway, Gao bravely declares: "A country without justice is no longer a real country, but a soulless shell."

In the film and in real life, Gao was imprisoned and relentlessly tortured for writing three open letters to Chinese leaders exposing how authorities had systematically tortured Falun Gong practitioners to force them to renounce their beliefs. Refusing to either sign a statement of remorse or stop defending Falun Gong practitioners, he explains to Lucy that writing a letter to the central government is a legal act.

"If I silence myself about their suffering today, I will also silence myself about the suffering of others in the future," he says.

Like all good films, there are twists and turns as the story unfolds, and new characters emerge who drive the narrative.

In Canada, Lucy helps the sick wife of another Chinese lawyer, Guo Ming, who is detained in China. Kiki, Guo's daughter who now lives in Canada, had experienced a traumatic childhood as her father challenged how courts applied Chinese law in defending those victimized by the state. Kiki exemplifies the unintended suffering that

accompanies the righteous actions of lawyers in China who seek justice for people in a country not governed by the rule of law.

The key events in “Where Are You” relate to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yet the arrest and enforced disappearance of rights lawyers in China, like Gao Li and Guo Ming in the film, has not let up. On July 9, 2015, the Chinese regime began its so-called “709” [crackdown](#) that effectively criminalized the profession and practice of human rights law. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have regularly reported the ongoing harassment and incarceration of rights lawyers in China.

Reflecting the important issues raised in the film, Margaret Satterthwaite, the U.N. special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, on Feb. 14 sent a 12-page letter to representatives of the People’s Republic of China. Her letter highlights ongoing international concern over the violation of these lawyers’ rights and the prison sentences meted out to them on so-called national security grounds.

Many lawyers in China have sought to uphold the rights of ordinary people as conferred by the Chinese constitution and Chinese laws. This important film helps speak for them—those who are detained, missing, or killed, their family members who are left behind, and those who escaped communist China and now reside in North America and similar countries.

Toronto-based director Kevin Yang, who also directed “Once We Were Divine” and “Claws of the Red Dragon,” has created a moving film about self-sacrifice and forgiveness that reaches out to us all. It highlights the importance of standing up for justice, when upholding truth and humanity is treated as a criminal act.

We all face challenges in life, balancing what we know is right with thoughts of self-interest and fear of losing something we may hold dear.

If you are wondering whether you should see “Where Are You,” I recommend that you watch it, and then watch it again. You may well discover something you missed within the film, and perhaps within yourself.

“Where Are You,” a 2024 production by NTD Canada, can be seen on [Gan Jing World](#).

John A. Deller is a committee member of the Falun Dafa Association of Australia.

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