Hooligan Sparrow
A Film by Nanfu Wang
I first heard about Ye Haiyan (who is known more widely by her nickname, “Hooligan Sparrow,” in China) a few years ago when I read an article online about a Chinese woman who was offering to work as a sex worker—for free. I’ve lived in China most of my life, and I’ve always been interested in issues related to sex workers’ rights, so I was curious to learn more about this woman and what motivated her.

The brothel where she offered to work was one of thousands across China known as “Ten Yuan Brothels,” which are frequented by the poorest of China’s migrant laborers. The brothels take their name from the average price of a visit with one of their working girls—ten yuan, or about two dollars.

Sparrow had a long history of advocating for women’s rights in China, and she was offering free sex in the brothel to expose the terrible working conditions there and the desperate lives of the migrant workers who frequent such places.

As I researched Sparrow, I learned that, like me, she came from a poor farming village with limited access to education. I appreciated her respect for people whom Chinese society rejected, and I shared her desire to understand their lives more deeply. I reached out to her via email in early 2013 to see if she’d be willing to let me film her as part of a larger video project about sex workers in China. She replied, “When you’re in China, we’ll talk.”

On May 15, 2013, I returned to China from the United States, where I had lived for two years at the time. When I landed and got ahold of her, she was in the midst of preparing for a public protest with a number of other activists. Two government officials in southern China had taken six schoolgirls to a hotel for a night, and the local government seemed poised to hand down a perfunctory sentence in the case. Sparrow and her fellow activists wanted justice for the girls and their families, so they planned to stage a public demonstration denouncing the government and the officials, a move that could land all of them in prison.

I knew at that moment that I had a different story to tell. I asked Sparrow and the other activists if I could follow them and record what happened at the protest. They agreed.

The chain of events I witnessed in the months that followed the protest shocked me. I’ve never had illusions about fairness in China’s justice system or the accountability of its government. But I never expected to see ordinary people turn on neighbors who were fighting for their rights. I never expected to be attacked by screaming mobs just for filming on the street. I never expected to be interrogated by national security agents, nor did I think my family and friends would be harassed and threatened by secret police.

But this is the China I saw.

Nanfu Wang
Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Editor, Hooligan Sparrow
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Thanks to those who reviewed this guide:
Nanfu Wang
Director, Hooligan Sparrow
The danger is palpable as intrepid young filmmaker Nanfu Wang follows maverick activist Ye Haiyan (aka Hooligan Sparrow) to southern China to seek justice in the case of six elementary school girls sexually abused by their principal. Marked as enemies of the state, the activists are under constant government surveillance and face interrogation, harassment and imprisonment. Sparrow continues to champion girls’ and women’s rights and arms herself with the power of social media.

Filmmaker Wang becomes a target, too, dealing with destroyed cameras and intimidation. The resulting film, *Hooligan Sparrow* (82 min.) named for this inspirational revolutionary, is replete with footage shot guerrilla-style using secret recording devices and hidden-camera glasses. Wang’s journey with Sparrow and her fellow activists includes street protests, mob intimidation, arrests, evictions and more, giving viewers a stunning sense of what it takes for human rights defenders to persevere in a seemingly impossible battle for justice and social change.
**Hooligan Sparrow** is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries

**Hooligan Sparrow** is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- activism
- authoritarianism
- China
- documentary film
- feminism
- free speech
- freedom
- gender-based violence
- government corruption
- government surveillance
- human rights
- protest
- rape/sexual abuse
- sex workers
- women's rights
- women’s studies

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**USING THIS GUIDE**

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **Hooligan Sparrow** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit [www.pov.org/engage](http://www.pov.org/engage)
About Ye Haiyan, aka Hooligan Sparrow

Ye Haiyan, aka Hooligan Sparrow, is a blogger and activist who has been advocating for women’s rights, sex workers’ rights and sex education since the early 2000s. When she was younger, she wanted to be an author. Today her work, published on her blog, is read by thousands.

Haiyan was born in 1975 in rural China, where she lived until she was 21. She moved away from her hometown to find a job where she could earn more money than she was making as a substitute teacher. Haiyan found work as a manager at a karaoke club, where she first witnessed the living and working conditions of sex workers in China. She also met her husband (now divorced) at the karaoke club and they had a daughter together. Following her divorce, Haiyan lived for a time with a group of sex workers and began blogging about women’s rights and sex education. In 2006, she opened the China Grassroots Women’s Rights Center, where she gave out free condoms and talked to women about HIV/AIDS and safer sex practices.

In 2010, Haiyan spent two days working as a sex worker in a brothel for free. Her intention was to raise awareness about the working conditions and rights of sex workers. At the brothel, Haiyan also distributed a petition to end discrimination against sex workers and to legalize sex work. Haiyan’s story became an online sensation, angering the government and other parties. In 2012, her then newly established Fuping Health Center was repeatedly vandalized, forcing her to shut it down.

Since 2012, Ye Haiyan has continued her advocacy work, despite government scrutiny and physical violence. She has been physically attacked, placed under house arrest, arbitrarily detained and forced into homelessness. In 2014, she was banned from leaving China.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Hooligan Sparrow

Sources


Child Sexual Assault Cases in China

In 2013, Ye Haiyan and a small group of women’s rights activists protested sexual assault in schools in response to the case featured in the film: a principal sexually assaulted six schoolgirls in Hainan, China. The protests served as a catalyst for a national conversation on a longstanding issue—the high rates of rape and sexual assault in schools in China. In May 2013 alone, 20 cases of sexual abuse were reported. In 2013, 125 cases were reported, 43 of which involved a teacher. Frank discussions of sex and inappropriate physical contact are largely taboo in China, and sex education programs are limited. Ye Haiyan’s protest in Hainan brought conversations about sexual assault to mainstream news outlets, and more cases were uncovered as a result. Many victims don’t report assaults due to limited sex education—indeed, many cases go unreported simply because children are unaware that what they are experiencing is a form of assault.
Sexual abuse of children is more common in rural areas, especially among children from unstable households. It is common for parents in rural areas to be forced to leave home to find work, leaving their children under the supervision of relatives or neighbors, or even on their own. These children can be more vulnerable to the sexual advances of teachers or other authority figures. In addition to the assault of children by teachers and school administrators, the use of schoolchildren as sexual bribes in government deals is a persistent problem in China. These children are “gifted” to government officials by businessmen or even school administrators in exchange for prime business deals or other favors.

The men involved in the Hainan case were found guilty of rape in June 2013. The school principal was sentenced to 13 years in prison, and the public official was sentenced to 11 years.

Sources


Freedom of Expression in China

China is considered an authoritarian state by many international agencies, including Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. According to Human Rights Watch, the Chinese government "systematically curbs fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, association, assembly and religion, when their exercise is perceived to threaten one-party rule." The Chinese government has become one of the most restrictive national governments in the world when it comes to policing online political communication. Persecution of bloggers and Internet journalists who participate in online activism is not uncommon.

A Chinese activist who wishes to organize a protest or a demonstration offline must first gain permission from the state. Article 35 of the Chinese constitution protects the right to assemble freely—which includes political demonstrations—but a few paragraphs later, Article 51 stipulates that in exercising such rights protestors “may not infringe upon the interests of the State.” In reality, most applications for public demonstrations are denied, and applicants may even be arrested for requesting demonstration permits.

The government has been known to hire people to break up protests physically, even when demonstrators are behaving peacefully. Outspoken activists and organizers of protests, like Ye Haiyan, are targeted by local officials and subsequently arrested and arbitrarily detained on vague and unsubstantiated claims that state secrets have been leaked, or that they were “gathering a crowd to disturb social order.” These activists can face lengthy prison terms, sometimes indefinite detention, without access to legal counsel.

Sources

Arbitrary Detainment

The Chinese government has a history of detaining its citizens without charges for indefinite periods of time. “Re-education through labor” camps were frequently employed during the Mao era, and even into the 21st century, to suppress political dissidents. Prisoners at these camps were denied access to the formal legal system and forced to perform hard labor on behalf of the state. The government officially ended the re-education through labor program in 2013, but arbitrary detention in police stations and undisclosed locations continues today.

According to Nanfu Wang and the makers of Hooligan Sparrow, all of the activists featured in the film have been
detained by police at some point. Arbitrary detentions in China may vary in length from week-long stints, like that of Ye Haiyan in 2013, to years in prison. Police are able to hold citizens without charges on the grounds of state security. When detainees are held on charges related to state secrets, police can keep them locked up without trial—denying them access to both legal counsel and their families—for up to six months, or even indefinitely.

The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states in Article 9, “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.” The document goes on to say that everyone has the right to a fair trial and legal counsel, as well as the right to be notified of the charges that are being held against them. China has never ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which entered into force in 1976; it is, however, a signatory, meaning that while China has not officially bound itself to this agreement, it does have “an obligation to refrain, in good faith, from acts that would defeat the object and the purpose of the treaty, according to the United Nations.

In July 2015, police enforced a widespread crackdown on lawyers in China, specifically targeting human rights advocates. Among those arbitrarily detained was Wang Yu, the lawyer featured in Hooligan Sparrow. The police claimed they suspected Wang Yu and her colleagues of “illegally organizing paid protests.” Wang Yu was released more than a year later, in August 2016. However, her family and lawyers were not informed of her release, and her release was dependent upon a taped confession in which the lawyer says that she was forced by “foreign forces” to speak out against the Chinese government. In the video, she renounced her former legal activities and human rights work and said, “I am Chinese. I only accept the leadership of the Chinese government.” A representative from Amnesty International observed in a CNN interview that it is “legitimate for us to question whether the ‘confession’ was genuine or not.”
Wang Yu’s “confession” follows an established pattern in China. Taped “confessions” have become more common in China under Xi Jinping’s presidency, and they are reminiscent of methods used by the government during the Cultural Revolution. A range of political detainees, including journalists, lawyers, book publishers and human rights activists, have made such tapes following their releases. China denies coercing confessions out of former detainees.

**Sources**

- http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/02/05/271412045/china-ends-one-notorious-form-of-detention-but-keeps-others
Selected People Featured in *Hooligan Sparrow*

**Ye Haiyan (aka Hooligan Sparrow)** - The activist featured in the film. Born in 1975, Hooligan Sparrow is famous for using nudity to advocate for sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS, and women and girls facing gender-based violence or discrimination.

**Yaxin** - Hooligan Sparrow’s daughter.

**Nanfu Wang** - The filmmaker. Originally from a remote village in China, now based in New York City, Wang overcame poverty to earn degrees from Shanghai University, Ohio University, and New York University.

**Wang Yu** - The lawyer who represents Hooligan Sparrow. In 2015, Yu was arrested for her human rights advocacy and held in an undisclosed prison without formal charges. Yu was released in 2016 after the Chinese government released a tape of her confession, which many human rights agencies suspect was coerced.
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- What’s your initial reaction to the film?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

To help people synthesize what they’ve experienced and move the focus of the discussion from the film to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to __________.
**Activism: General**

What did you learn from the film about what it takes to be a successful activist?

One of the activists in the film, Zeng Guoyong, says, “I believe witnessing is one way of making social change.” How do witnesses contribute to social change?

After her family is questioned by security, filmmaker Nanfu Wang says, “I realized anyone I contacted could be at risk.” Under what circumstances would you be willing to engage in political protest if you knew that it might result in your family or friends being harassed (or worse)?

Hooligan Sparrow asks the filmmaker not to film too much in her village because, “I don’t want my family to know what happened to me. I only show them the simple side of me, like any other peasant woman, instead of letting them know who I really am and what my dreams are. I don’t talk about these things.” She also says, “My family might not understand me, and I’ll probably feel isolated at home, but home is where I feel safe.” How do you think this relationship with her family affects Sparrow and her capacity for activism?

If you were Sparrow’s mother, would you want to know about your daughter’s activities? Why or why not?

Sparrow explains, “Being born in a rural area, I’m at the bottom of the social structure. All my family members are farmers. I’ve seen them die because they can’t afford a doctor. I’ve seen them crack under the pressure and commit suicide. It happens all the time.” How does poverty make it more difficult to oppose government policy actively? How might it make opposing the government easier?

**Activism: Tactics**

In one expression of Sparrow’s confrontational style of activism, she posts a photo online saying, “I’m a sex worker. I’m offering sex for free.” How does this tactic advance the causes that Sparrow cares about?

Sparrow is famous for using nudity to advocate for women’s rights. What do you think of this tactic? Is nudity for the ex-
plicit purpose of political expression different than nudity intended for sexual arousal, and if so, how?

One observer of the Hainan protest dismisses the group saying that it is “f***ing useless to yell like this.” Yet eventually, in a rare verdict, the principal and another staff member are convicted of rape. What role, if any, do you think the protest plays in that verdict?

Wang Yu pursues Sparrow’s unlawful detention suit against police even though she knows they will lose. The filmmaker wonders why she bothers. Yu answers:

Our goal is to raise the public’s awareness of the law. Otherwise if we always acquiesce in unlawful arrests of citizens, the circumstances will be worse than ever. Even if we lose the lawsuit, we want everybody to know that what they did was against the law. Let the public be the judge of who truly violated the law.

How does the creation of public awareness help “change the game” in an authoritarian nation? Can you think of any examples where awareness has fomented social change?

Acclaimed Chinese artist Ai Weiwei recreates the scene of Sparrow and her daughter with their belongings by the side of the road. What was it like to see this scene in the middle of a Brooklyn art gallery? What statement do you think the artist was making?

As part of the protest, Sparrow posts a picture on social media with the message “HEY PRINCIPAL: GET A ROOM WITH ME AND LEAVE THE KIDS ALONE!” The picture goes viral and, she says, “People all over the world made their own versions of the same sign. With so much attention focused on the case, the government began to react.” How does the existence of social media influence tactics? What are the pros and cons of Sparrow’s over-the-top methods in a social media environment?
Government Suppression/Undermining Dissent

When the man in Sparrow’s apartment urges Nanfu to leave and asks for her hard drive, do you trust that he is acting in her best interest? What does this exchange tell you about the power of suspicion to undermine dissent?

Sparrow repeatedly calls the police for protection, to little avail. How does the role that you see police play in the film compare to the role of police in your community? Do your police protect dissenters? Do you think they should?

Lawyer Wang Yu points out that China “has a Child Protection Law, Women Protection Law, etc. But they only exist in name.” Which do you think is better (and why): having protection laws on the books that are not enforced or not having protection laws at all?

Despite encouragement from Wang Yu, the father of one of the girls raped by their school principal declines to speak out because he fears government retribution. What would you say to someone in his position?

A crowd gathers outside Sparrow’s apartment, insisting that she move out. Wang Yu explains, “They were hired by the government, which is unique to China. The government controls most resources. It can pay anybody to do anything.” List all the tactics you see in the film that are used to intimidate and silence Sparrow and her fellow activists. What prevents similar tactics from being used in your country?

Media

What do you notice about the ways in which the presence of a camera influences events?

How do the activists use media to prevent the government from distorting their message or distorting the facts? How does the government use media to discredit the activists?

Sparrow is interviewed by a reporter who repeatedly asks her to do re-takes of her filmed introduction. How does this sort of staging influence the credibility of the story?

An activist named Huang seems especially interested in learning about Nanfu’s camera, and he eventually purchases his own. He tells the filmmaker, “When you’re repressed and defenseless, the only thing you can do is to document the atrocities.” Why would documentation be important to activists like Huang and Sparrow? In your view, who should take responsibility to ensure that events are documented?

Yaxin describes an encounter with a reporter:

At first, I thought that he was my mom’s friend, later I found out he was a journalist from Southern Window Magazine... He asked me many questions such as, “Did your mom injure anybody?” I said no. A few days after the interview, the magazine came out... My heart was filled with anger. He distorted what I said. It read like a fiction... At that moment, my great image of journalists was shattered. Just like my image of the police.

What’s your general view of journalists? Who controls the publications or media outlets that employ them? What role do they play in supporting the status quo or promoting social change? Have you ever been interviewed by a reporter? How did your experience compare with Yaxin’s?

Gender Roles and Women’s Rights

Through the case against the Hainan school principal, we learn sex bribes—using girls as gifts for government officials—are common. What does this use of sex with girls as a “reward” say about society’s view of what it means to be a man or a woman (i.e., its constructions of manhood/masculinity and womanhood/femininity)?

Sparrow explains, “In China, government officials get away with rape by claiming their victims were prostitutes.” How does acceptance of the notion that prostitutes can’t be raped end up hurting or endangering all women and girls?

Sparrow explains her choice to become an activist on issues related to sex workers: “What made them choose to be sex workers? I know it’s poverty. I know how women sacrifice themselves for their families. We give up education. We marry someone we don’t love but who can provide financial help. When people judge women’s choices they forget their sacrifices. Because I understand the injustice they suffer, I want to stand up for them.” Do you see a link between sexism and poverty? How does poverty affect women and men differently?

At one of the protests, women sing about one of their cultural heroes:

Ancient Hua Mulan joined the army for her father, today women warriors take up guns for the people. March on and march on! As soldiers we carry great responsibilities, as women we suffer deep injustice.

Which heroes who could serve as inspiration for women and girls pursuing justice exist in your cultural tradition?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
Taking Action

• Follow the film's social media to find out which activists are in need of immediate support and learn about ways to get involved: http://hooligansparrow.com/urgent-action/

• Or find ways to support other human rights activists across the globe via organizations like Movements.org or Amnesty International.

• Using Hooligan Sparrow's political creativity as inspiration, raise awareness about violence against women and girls in your own community and engage people in conversations about ways to prevent it.

• Convene a panel discussion on the limits of free speech and whether its boundaries include nudity.

• Hold a one-day POV film festival focused on Chinese human rights activists, screening Hooligan Sparrow, Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case and High Tech, Low Life.

• Examine China's track record with regard to the agreements it has signed related to women's and human rights (e.g., the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing Declaration and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Urge your political representatives to hold governments accountable for the human rights treaties they sign.

• Make your own documentary or start your own citizen blog covering underreported stories in your community.
FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

HOOLIGAN SPARROW
hooligansparrow.com
In addition to information on the film, the website includes updates on some of the activists and suggestions for ways to support them.

Original Online Content on POV
To further enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The Hooligan Sparrow website—www.pbs.org/pov/HooliganSparrow—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with filmmaker; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; a lesson plan with streaming clips; and special features.

Film-Related Human Rights

CHINA HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYERS CONCERN GROUP
chrlawyers.hk/en
This Hong Kong-based group is working to support lawyers in China who defend human rights activists. The site is a good place to find out about current cases, including Wang Yu’s detention.

HUMANRIGHTS.GOV
HumanRights.gov
This is a portal for official U.S. government reporting and action related to human rights. See www.humanrights.gov/dyn/countries/china.html for information specifically related to China and www.humanrights.gov/freethe20/ for information on Wang Yu and 19 other women who are political prisoners around the world.

General Human Rights: China

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: CHINA
amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china
In addition to general reports, Amnesty International features cases of individuals being unjustly detained for journalism or peaceful activism.

CHINA CHANGE
chinachange.org
This site is devoted to bringing news about civil society and human rights activism in China to the English-speaking world. It includes an interesting annotated set of links to the sites it relies upon for news gathering.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: CHINA AND TIBET
hrw.org/asia/china-and-tibet
Human Rights Watch is a good source for general overviews. Also of interest is this update on Wang Yu: hrw.org/news/2016/04/03/china-detained-lawyers-activists-denied-basic-rights
HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order Hooligan Sparrow for home use, go to http://hooligansparrow.com/.

To order Hooligan Sparrow for educational use, go to https://www.kinolorberedu.com/film/hooligansparrow.

Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 36 Emmy® Awards, 19 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Curated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department created PBS’s first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. POV Digital continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the POV Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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You can follow us on Twitter @POVengage for the latest news from POV Community Engagement & Education.