



## Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang Discussion Guide

Director: Kevin Macdonald

Year: 2016

Time: 76 min

### You might know this director from:

Christmas in a Day (2013)

Marley (2012)

Life in a Day (2011)

My Enemy's Enemy (2007)

Touching the Void (2003)

One Day in September (1999)

## FILM SUMMARY

Just before dawn on June 15, 2015, after two decades of dreaming, planning, and three failed attempts at various points around the globe, the world renowned artist Cai Guo-Qiang, famous for his site specific explosion and fireworks events and large-scale installations, realized his immensely personal “Sky Ladder” project off the shore of Huiyu Island, a small fishing village near his hometown of Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. Leading up to this momentous occasion, director Kevin Macdonald’s SKY LADDER: THE ART OF CAI GUO-QIANG tells the story of how Cai went from being the creatively inclined son of an unknown calligrapher to being the most well respected and sought after artists working in the immensely expensive art form of fireworks events.

After dabbling in oil painting, acting, and theatrical stage design, having attended the Shanghai Theater Academy in the early 1980s, Cai moved to Japan where he began to experiment with gunpowder and oil paint. But it was his site specific, large-scale explosion events and fireworks shows on the global stage that garnered international attention. Following his immense explosion works dealing with the Great Wall of China and the U.S. Government’s nuclear test site in Nevada, Cai had major shows and installations at renown art institutions around the globe, including the Guggenheim, the Tate Modern, and MOMA.

Though Cai began his career as an outsider artist, he was invited to serve the Chinese government as the Director of Visual and Special Effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, delving into the complicated waters of producing propaganda for his home country. SKY LADDER: THE ART OF CAI GUO-QIANG shows Cai letting go of his massive commissions and attempting to rekindle the magic of making art for art’s sake by tackling a passion project like no other.

## FILM THEMES

Cai Guo-Qiang's long and varied career as an artist of explosive intent has taken him down many creative rabbit holes, such as extending the Great Wall of China with a gunpowder fuse, mounting major installations at the Guggenheim, and serving as the director of visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

### A NICHE FOUND

Cai grew up surrounded by the arts, with a father who was a calligrapher and traditional painter and who worked in a bookstore. With artistic ambitions of his own, Cai felt he was somewhat living in his father's shadow. As a young adult, he decided to dabble in acting, performing in two martial art films. He went on to study stage design at the Shanghai Theater Academy from 1981 to 1985, but he ultimately found his artistic niche when he began to experiment with gunpowder and oil paint, and eventually, fireworks events and installations.

### FIREWORKS AS ART FORM

Though fireworks have long been a major part of the cultural heritage of China, few have claimed it as a viable art form in and of itself. Guo-Qiang, on the other hand, found creative solace in the small-scale gunpowder oil paintings he began his career with in the 1980s, and found acclaim with the large-scale, site specific explosion and firework events he started to focus on in the early 1990s. Today, it is without question that Guo-Qiang, with the help of his diligent and devout team, have legitimized fireworks and gunpowder as a viable medium for making art as profound and moving as any other.

### DANGER OF MAKING ART AS PROPAGANDA

Pablo Picasso once proclaimed that "Art is something subversive. If art is ever given the keys to the city, it will be because it's been so watered down, rendered so impotent, that it's not worth fighting for." Cai learned this very lesson after working with the Chinese government on two separate projects, the 2008 Olympics opening and closing ceremonies in Beijing, and the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC). Midway through each project, Cai's creative vision was lost and his initial motivations for the projects were abandoned.

### ART FROM THE HEART

"This is where I want to make a ladder to connect the Earth to the universe," said Cai in 1994, just prior to his first, unsuccessful attempt to realize his immensely personal "Sky Ladder" project. Following several large-scale, propagandistic projects for the Chinese government, including the 2008 Olympic ceremonies, Cai felt it necessary to go back to his roots, making art for personal reasons, rather than for professional recognition. The result, on his fourth attempt, was the creation of the explosion event dubbed "Sky Ladder," which was an immense 500-meter-long-firework-lined representation of a ladder to heaven, dedicated to his 100-year-old grandma.

**"I want to connect the earth to the universe."**

Cai Guo-Qiang

**"Destroy nothing, create nothing."**

Mao Zedong

**"My work is like a dialogue between me and unseen powers, like alchemy."**

Cai Guo-Qiang



## FILM FACTS:

- Kevin Macdonald's SKY LADDER: THE ART OF CAI GUO-QIANG had its debut in the World Documentary competition at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. On Mar 1, 2016, Netflix announced that it had acquired the film for worldwide distribution via its streaming service. Macdonald had previously won an Oscar for Best Documentary for his film ONE DAY IN SEPTEMBER, released in 2000.
- Cai Guo-Qiang was born in 1957 in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China. By his mid-20s, Cai had acted in a pair of action films and attended the Shanghai Theater Academy as a student of stage design. Shortly after, he began to experiment with oil paint and gunpowder, moving to Japan in 1986 to pursue his interests in the arts.
- One of Cai's first large-scale explosion events that garnered international attention was his "Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10", which saw him set off an approximately six-mile-long gunpowder fuse that extended beyond the western end of the Great Wall at the edge of the Gobi Desert.
- In 2008, Cai received a large-scale mid-career retrospective, titled "I Want To Believe," at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The show eventually traveled to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.
- Controversy was caused when organizers of the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony admitted that they had created fake, digitally composed foot-print shaped fireworks for the television broadcast, though the fireworks were in fact real in person. Cai [released a statement](#) defending his involvement and the decision to use the digital backup for broadcast.
- Having taken place just before dawn on June 15, 2015 off the shore of Huiyu Island in China, the "Sky Ladder" event was composed of a gigantic white balloon filled with 6200 cubic meters of helium and with a five-ton pulling force which slowly dragged a 500-meter long, 5.5-meter wide ladder lined with quick-burning fuses and nozzles of gold fireworks high into the sky.
- Cai's first solo exhibition was titled "Space No. 1 - Explosions and Space Holes: Cai Guo-Qiang". It opened at a gallery called Kigoma in 1988. In 2016, Cai curated the "What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China" show at the Al Riwaq Exhibition Center in Doha, Qatar.
- Cai dedicated the successful launch of his "Sky Ladder" to his grandmother, a very important individual in his life, who celebrated her 100th birthday just prior to the event and died four months later. Too sick to attend the momentous event live, she was able to witness Cai's achievement via Skype.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Engage** with the arts. You've already watched a documentary, so you're on the right track. Now, go out in your community, visit galleries, museums, theaters, clubs, a fireworks show, and take it all in!
2. **Advocate** for immigrant artists. Programs like the [New York Foundation for the Arts' Immigrant Artist Mentoring Program](#) pairs immigrant artists from all disciplines with artist mentors who provide their mentees with one-on-one support.
3. **Donate** to organizations like the [Asian Cultural Council](#), which pledges "to advance international dialogue, understanding, and respect through cultural exchanges that nurture the individual talents of artists and scholars in Asia and the United States."

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**