



## Hooligan Sparrow Discussion Guide

Director: Nanfu Wang

Year: 2016

Time: 84 min

**You might know this director from:**

I Am Another You (2017)

### FILM SUMMARY

Shot guerrilla-style on the surveilled streets of China, Nanfu Wang's debut feature film follows the public dissent of Ye Haiyan, more widely known as the activist Hooligan Sparrow, as she attempts to raise awareness for the rights of sex workers, calls attention to a case of child sexual abuse by school officials, and straight up calls out the government for its blatant disregard for these issues and others. The only problem is that speaking out against the Chinese government is an illegal act that often garners the kind of attention that brings hired thugs to one's door step, runs one out of their hometown, or worse yet, can lead to jail time.

Keeping her cameras close (sometimes covertly wearing them like clothing or acting as though they are turned off), Nanfu Wang completely captures the very real sense of danger that lurks around every corner and potentially in any individual with whom she comes in contact. Shooting non-government backed films, especially documentaries that are highly critical of Chinese politics or political officials, is strictly illegal. We see her and her subjects fleeing from government officials. We see her speaking to the camera, contemplating whether or not she's making the right decision in risking her freedom for this story.

As it turns out, Wang was right to keep filming. Through its strident dissent, HOOLIGAN SPARROW becomes an immensely powerful and harrowing exploration of the lack of free speech under the rule of Chinese authoritarianism and the importance of social media and art as tools for speaking out against oppressive governments and corrupt officials.

## FILM THEMES

By diving headlong into activism under the authoritarian rule of the Chinese government, Nanfu Wang and Ye Haiyan explore the restrictions of free speech and the assumed role of women in China today.

### ACTIVISM IN THE FACE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

“Principal, call me if you want to get a room. Leave the pupils alone.” This is the message Hooligan Sparrow put out into the world to draw attention to a child abuse case in which a school director was accused of raping six female teenage students. In the wake of this act of protest, she was threatened by hired thugs and was subsequently arrested. Director Nanfu Wang was also pressured to forgo her filmmaking and chased by authorities. As [Ai Weiwei](#) has stated, “In a society like this there is no negotiation, no discussion, except to tell you that power can crush you any time they want”.

### SEX WORKERS’ RIGHTS (OR LACK THEREOF)

According to [Human Rights Watch](#), who is actively campaigning to remove criminal and administrative sanctions against voluntary, consensual adult sex work and related offenses, women engaging in sex work within China are frequently victims of a wide range of police abuses. These include “arbitrary arrests and detentions, physical violence, and other ill-treatment” while they “also face high risks of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.” In an effort to raise awareness about these abysmal working conditions and the rights of sex workers, Ye Haiyan gained national notoriety via social media after working in a brothel for two days free of charge while petitioning to legalize sex work.

### SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MEANS OF FREE SPEECH

Last year, [The Washington Post](#) reported that 676.4 million Internet users sit behind the Great Firewall of China, “a giant mechanism of censorship and surveillance that blocks tens of thousands of websites deemed inimical to the Communist Party’s narrative and control, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and even Instagram.” Weibo is China’s Twitter equivalent and a rare outlet for free speech under Chinese rule, as is evidenced by Hooligan Sparrow’s sex work story going viral.

### ART AS A VOICE

Staging a public demonstration denouncing the government and its officials is no joke in China—the act eventually landed Ye Haiyan in prison. Her voice may have been temporarily silenced, but Nanfu Wang was determined to create a cinematic work that expressed the rage, heartbreak, and passion that Hooligan Sparrow has embodied since going public with her activism, online and in the streets. Ai Weiwei has also given voice to Sparrow in his Brooklyn Museum installation “Ye Haiyan’s Belongings”, in which Sparrow’s actual belongings, left behind on the side of the road while fleeing for her and her daughter’s safety, were placed on display for contemplation.

**“Principal, call me if you want to get a room. Leave the pupils alone.”**

Ye Haiyan

**“If you dare to film us, we’ll smash your camera.”**

Anonymous

**“I didn’t feel safe even when I was in somebody’s house because they could break in anytime and I was worried about my footage constantly.”**

Nanfu Wang



## FILM FACTS:

- As Nanfu Wang’s debut feature film, HOOLIGAN SPARROW had its world premiere at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize in the World Documentary competition. The film had a year-long festival run, going on to screen at Full Frame, Hot Docs, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, and the Stockholm International Film Festival.
- Not only was HOOLIGAN SPARROW a 2016 Peabody Award winner, but the film’s subject Ye Haiyan received an Unforgettables award at the Cinema Eye Honors, where director Nanfu Wang was also honored with the Outstanding Achievement in a Debut Feature Film award. Wang was also given the Nestor Almendros Award for her exceptional commitment to human rights from the Human Rights Watch Film Festival.
- On May 30, 2013, Ye Haiyan, along with multiple other Chinese activists, launched an online campaign to draw attention to a case in which a school director was accused of raping six female teenage students. She posted a photo of herself holding a sign that read, “Principal, call me if you want to get a room. Leave the pupils alone.” The campaign went viral, causing public outrage in response to the government’s inaction.
- Sparrow spent two days in a brothel engaged in free sex work, publicizing the event online as a way to call attention to the lack of rights for sex workers in China. Two years prior, she launched the Chinese Women’s Rights Workshop, distributing condoms and Aids-prevention pamphlets to brothels in Wuhan while calling for an end to discrimination against sex workers and the scrapping of anti-prostitution laws.
- In April 2014, acclaimed Chinese artist Ai Weiwei’s “Ye Haiyan’s Belongings” installation, featuring Ye Haiyan’s actual possessions, opened at the Brooklyn Museum in New York as part of the “Ai Weiwei: According to What?” show.
- Despite being threatened, attacked, placed under arrest, forced into homelessness, and banned from leaving China, Ye Haiyan continues her efforts in activism, advocating for sex workers and free speech.
- Nanfu Wang went on to finish her sophomore film I AM ANOTHER YOU in 2017, despite actually having shot much of the footage prior to beginning HOOLIGAN SPARROW. The film had its debut at SXSW in Austin, Texas.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Help** fight human rights abuses and honor those who speak out by supporting the non-profit, nongovernmental, worldwide organization [Human Rights Watch](#).
2. **Be** an advocate. While the voices of Chinese women’s rights activists are being silenced, you can voice the need to address gender inequality and the violation of women’s human rights via the [Nobel Women’s Initiative](#).
3. **Join** the [#FreeThe20 Campaign](#) to draw attention and awareness to the 20 women’s rights activists imprisoned around the world, including Chinese human rights lawyer, Wang Yu, as seen in HOOLIGAN SPARROW.
4. **Contact** your local government representative. Letters can keep officials informed and can lead to political pressure to release prisoners.

## 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.**