



Hooligan Sparrow
(2016) and Wang Nanfu



Hooligan Sparrow

A Conversation with Wang Nanfu

ZENG Jinyan, TAN Jia

After her return to China in June 2013, Wang Nanfu, a postgraduate from New York University, trained her camera on Ye Haiyan, an activist for sex workers (see Tiantian Zheng's essay in this issue). In Hainan province, she filmed Ye's protests against the sexual assault of several primary school girls by their principal, and the ensuing repression. The local government went out of its way to silence the relatives of the victims, their lawyers, and activists who had mobilised in support. Human rights lawyer Wang Yu—who had accompanied Ye Haiyan to Hainan—was even arrested for alleged subversion of state power. The film captured the whole story, from the moment when Ye and her daughter were chased, threatened, monitored, and eventually expelled by plain-clothes police until their return to their hometown, a small village by the Yangtze River.

Born in the 1980s in Jiangxi province, director Wang Nanfu holds three master's degrees conferred by New York University, Ohio University, and Shanghai University. Her first documentary *Hooligan Sparrow* debuted at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, won numerous awards at human rights film festivals, and made the shortlist for the 2017 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. This article is an excerpt from a Q&A session that took place during the *Desiring China* movie-screening series curated by Zeng Jinyan in 2016.

Q: The soundtrack of the director's video diaries and the voice-over in the film are both currently in English. Is this because the film initially targeted an international audience? Previously entitled *On the Way to Hainan*, an earlier version of the film was screened and discussed on different occasions. What were the considerations behind the major revisions of *Hooligan Sparrow*, resulting in the final version of the film?

A: When I first started filming *Hooligan Sparrow*, I had no idea that the movie would develop in its current direction. At that time, I was studying in New York, making several short videos about sex workers in the city. Many of them were proud of their work, and incredibly open and happy to tell stories about their relationships with clients. At that time, I only knew of Ye Haiyan from social media. I had heard that in the past she worked at a shop offering sexual services to migrant workers for 10 yuan. Growing up in a village in Jiangxi province, I also saw many uneducated women going to the city, not being able to find work, and becoming sex workers, only to be looked down on and discriminated against when they returned to their home villages. I wanted to return to China and look into the living conditions of sex workers, but I did not have a clear idea that I would be making a film about women's rights.

When I contacted Ye Haiyan, I hoped that she could introduce me to her sex-worker friends, and that through her I could obtain their trust and maybe even interview or film them. When I returned to China, I immediately got in touch with her. She told me that she was currently working on the case of the Hainan elementary school students who had been sexually assaulted by their school principal and government officials. The case had already been covered widely by the media, both new and traditional, but I instinctively thought that there would definitely be stories that had not been reported. So I told her that I would follow her to Hainan. From that moment, many things changed and it was no longer the story that I had initially envisioned.

Regarding the different versions of the film, each work of art has to go through a process of countless revisions. In early September 2013, after I finished filming, I returned to New York. It took about seven months of editing—from September 2013 until February 2014—to complete the initial version, which was rather rough. I showed it to many people including friends, classmates, teachers, and people with experience working in film, and asked them for feedback. Taking into account their opinions, I began reediting it. At that time, I had a full-time and part-time job, so I could only edit at night or in the hours when I was not working. Overall, I spent another year to prepare the final version of the film.

Between the different versions of the film, I remember facing several large challenges. The story was rather complicated; it was not only about the Hainan case, not only about Ye Haiyan, and not only about the protest, but rather about a series of interconnected things that had been triggered by the revelations of sexual assault. The entire government attempted to stifle the voices of everyone involved in the case, including myself. The challenges I faced were how to tell this story clearly, in a way that would not make people confused and wonder about the whole point of the movie.

Another issue was that it did not occur to me that I would actually put myself into the narrative of the film when I was filming. This changed during the editing process. The things that happened to me and the story that I was trying to tell about Ye Haiyan were the same, and a good example to elaborate the subject of the film. In the past, I was never involved in ‘rights defense’ incidents. I was also not very politicised. None of my family members and no one in the environment in which I grew up were involved with politics. But in a short period of under a week when I was filming Ye Haiyan’s campaign ‘Principal, get a room with me, and leave the school girls alone’ (校长, 开房找我, 放过小学生), the State Security Bureau started to call my family members and interrogate my friends. Going through this, I realised how fast the reaction was to constrain the influence of people speaking out, and finally decided to include my own story in the movie. My story could embody the complicated structure of the larger narrative. In short, I was faced with the question of how should I grasp my own role in the film, and how much of myself should be in it, while ensuring that my own role would not eclipse the focus of the film but would not be too trivial either?

You mentioned video diaries, which is actually very interesting. The first time I held a video camera was after I arrived in the United States in October 2011 for graduate studies. Probably everyone who studies abroad has this kind of experience—feelings of loneliness, hardship, and other complex emotions. At that time, I did not know anyone, I was just one person in a new country, studying what was for me an entirely new profession as I had no previous experience with filming and editing. I did not know where my future would be. In the United States, even high school students probably understood more than me; they would have been more familiar with the media, seen more movies, been more skilled with video cameras, and been more fluent in English than I was. At that time, I felt uncertain and insecure. But studying film was for me a new mode of expression. When I was in China, I worked hard at writing, and enjoyed expressing my innermost thoughts. But after I came to America, the channels for telling stories and

expressing myself suddenly became fewer and narrower. When I discovered the video camera, I felt that this was perfect, I could look at the world through the camera lens, and convey my own acute and sensitive discoveries. During that time of loneliness when I was studying for more than 18 hours a day, the camera was my only companion. As long as I was awake, I would be filming and I would use this form to record my life. As soon as I got home, I would put the camera on the tripod, and if I had any large emotional conflicts, I might record them. From this, I cultivated the habit of talking to the camera. Later when I started to make films, it was a natural continuation of that habit.

When I was filming *Hooligan Sparrow*, I made several video diaries because I felt very perplexed and astonished by what was happening. I would frequently ask them 'how could it be like this' and often would feel emotional ups and downs. At that time, the phone was monitored, and I also could not talk with many family members and friends; in the end, I could use these video diaries in the film. I was speaking both English and Chinese, maybe because I lived in the United States for several years and was in the habit of speaking English, and also because I was in a situation in which I could not communicate with anyone, it was a way to maintain distance and have a conversation with myself. The film narrative is in English because I realised that it would be difficult, extremely difficult, to screen the film in mainland China, and the only way that Chinese-speaking people from mainland China, Hong Kong, and other places could see the film would be if it had some impact and exposure in the Western world. If some people from the Western mainstream media and film circles reported on and discussed the film, one day maybe Chinese audiences would become curious about it, and want a chance to see it. This was my original intention when I was editing it.

At that time, what I was most worried about was not my personal safety but the film material. My camera and footage made me the most nervous. At some level, I thought that if I recorded, and had footage, then I had a weapon, and a means of resistance. I even thought that if they arrested me and locked me in prison, as long as I could film the process, at some level, I would still win. But the moment that they snatched away my footage, I would truly have no power to resist, and no value whatsoever. For this reason, I felt at that time that nothing was more important than the footage. I also made backup plans, and sent some material to friends in the United States and told them that if I was arrested, they needed to edit and share what I filmed.

So far this film has been screened hundreds of times in 20 countries and on public television in the United States. And slowly Chinese audiences are starting to express a desire to see it, and asking: ‘Where is it possible to see this film?’ Now I am thinking about how it can reach China. Although it would be very difficult to publicly screen it, finding other channels for people to watch it would still be good enough, including downloading it from the Internet. For this reason, I made another version a few months ago in which I changed the narrative from English into Chinese but the content is exactly the same.

Q: The creative process behind making *Hooligan Sparrow* is really interesting. It could be said that you are a very young new generation female director. Your ‘authorial consciousness’ comes across strongly in the video diaries. The audience could see many film scenes that did not happen to take place in front of you but were instead consciously chosen by you to use in the film. *Hooligan Sparrow* was your first movie, and in the credits we saw that your list of team members mentions several names of people who are internationally famous in the film industry. When did these people become involved in the film? What role did they play?

A: No movie is ever made by one person alone. It is possible to film or edit independently, but in the end, for the film to be seen by an audience requires the strength of a team. This was my first movie. Up until that point, I had no qualifications, no background, I did not even know anyone in the United States, and even if I had known someone, it would still have been difficult to find a team. Apart from the creative process, this was my largest difficulty. When I graduated from New York University, it was a struggle to find work; after I finally found a job, I started to slowly edit the film and I gradually realised that even if everyone told me that this was an excellent story and also a great film, if I did not find a channel and way for audiences to see it, it would just be gathering dust at home. So I began to realise that I needed to find help, including financial help, and help from people with experience, and that is how I finished making the movie.

My solution was to look for successful documentaries, and then find out who were in their production teams, who provided support behind the scenes and whether their topics were relevant to mine. For example, I knew that my film was about politics, human rights, and China, so I began to find details about similar films that were hugely successful in Western countries.

Q: *Hooligan Sparrow* does not focus solely on Ye Haiyan but instead tells a story about the network dynamics of the ‘rights defense’ movement—a group of people that includes both those at the forefront of the movement and those behind the scenes. The film depicts what happened after they finished their protests on the beaches in

Hainan, as well as their everyday realities. If I recall correctly, the initial version of the film even included scenes in which they went to local night markets and karaoke. These scenes left a deep impression on me [Zeng Jinyan] because they shattered the stereotypical image of activists as inflexible people who only chant slogans on the streets; I was deeply attracted by the richness displayed in these scenes. I do not know why you decided to cut these scenes, so this is my first question. As for the second question, the latter part of the film includes a scene about a village funeral. I personally cannot connect this scene to the theme of *Hooligan Sparrow*, and would thus like to ask what were your considerations when editing this part of the film.

A: The first scene that you mention is one of all of the women going out after their protests to karaoke and night markets near the beaches in Sanya, Hainan province. It was about one or two minutes. I kept a small fraction of the night markets scene but omitted the karaoke scene. The reason for cutting this is that the people who I asked for feedback on early versions of the film usually referred to these scenes as being slow or confusing. They would ask: ‘Why did we see these women going to karaoke?’ ‘What did they do in karaoke bars?’ Perhaps going to karaoke is a very common type of entertainment in China, but the karaoke scenes always gave rise to all kinds of questions and made it impossible for other people to follow the story. ‘Did they go to karaoke to enjoy themselves?’ ‘What is the connection between their going to karaoke and the story in the film?’ All in all, the karaoke scenes slowed down the pace of the story rather than drive the story forward. A very important principle for film editing is that each scene should be a bridge and stepping stone for the next scene. For this reason I cut many scenes from the film.

There were also lots of discussions about the funeral scene, whether it should be kept in the film or left out. Just as you did, many people wondered what was the connection between the funeral and the story; after all, it was not a funeral for her family. The funeral is one of my favourite scenes; as for whether it should be kept in the film, some people like it, whereas others do not. The reason why I like the funeral scene is that when I was filming this part, it was one or two days before I left Ye Haiyan’s home and, at that time, witnessing death and seeing things come to an end echoed my innermost feelings. During the full three months of filming all kinds of things happened, and life changed a lot for everyone. At the end of the process, the feeling of desolation when witnessing death moved me personally in myriad ways. After all, this movie also would come to an end, so I decided to include the scene. Some people told me that they could feel and understand the symbolic meaning of funeral in the movie. I therefore decided to keep it.

Q: You said that having made the film, you obtained a new understanding of China, the place where you grew up. How did the filmmaking process change your perspective?

A: I met many people during my studies who grew up in China but, in the end, decided to study in the United States. And by chance, one of them had a stopover in Hong Kong on his way to the United States, and bought some books at the airport in Hong Kong, only to find out stories about the Tiananmen Square Incident and many other events that he had never heard of before. It was this experience that transformed him. I feel that for many people who were born and grew up in mainland China, there must be a moment or event that has reshaped their understanding of the entire society.

I, however, also encountered many other friends who studied abroad and had a different reaction. Having become aware of my film and experiences, these people usually said to me: 'Why did you decide to reveal such negative events?' I told them that this is how it is, and that I was only documenting what really happened. They would say: 'Your decision to make the film will only further damage the image of China. As a Chinese person, you should strive to forge a positive image of China. Even if something negative happened, you should solve it within China rather than expose it internationally.' This is one line of thought that is rather prevalent.

I was at a public screening in New York once. Halfway through the screening, a student who was studying filmmaking in New York noticed that I was outside the door. He then ran to me and asked: 'Director, I want to talk with you one moment about a question I have.' I said to him: 'You don't want to finish watching the film?' He said: 'I can watch the film later. I want to chat with you first.' I replied: 'Okay, then what is your question?' He said: 'I know that politically-themed films are the ones that mostly win international awards. Is winning such an award the foremost motivation behind your choice of the theme of your film?' I replied: 'If you look at me in the film, do you think that I knew at that time I could win an award for making the film?' He said: 'Maybe you didn't, but still is it because you believed you could win an award that you selected this topic as the theme of your film?' This is a second line of thought.

The third line of thought I have encountered also came from my friends. These friends would say: 'Yes, I admit that many negative events have been happening in China, and I know some of them. But I still think that maintaining security should be prioritised. You don't want to see China plunge into wars and people's livelihoods become difficult, do you?'

These lines of thought make me feel that a person's way of thinking does not necessarily change simply because of their surroundings. Of course surroundings may facilitate change,

because there are more channels of information and access to books, films, articles, and people that were previously unavailable. That said, the kind of thoughts, worldviews, and philosophy you have still depends on your own thinking. It depends on whether you have always thought independently and reflected on what has happened rather than blindly believing what you saw, heard, and were taught. All of these factors will shape a person's way of thinking.

When I finished *Hooligan Sparrow* and looked again at my country, my emotions became very complicated. Because I am Chinese—a fact that I can never change—I love China, my entire family is still there, and I hope that I will see the country become a much better place. At the same time, I also realise that the road ahead is long. These mixed feelings of love and hatred echo what has recently happened worldwide, including how many Americans felt despondent after Trump became president. Can it be that this represents a type of universal condition? When you feel this kind of shock, I think that your way of looking at the entire world will change to some extent. ■

(Translated and adapted by Christian SORACE and Nan LIU)