

Episode 7: Hooligan Sparrow Transcript

Transcript is largely accurate, but in some instances it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:00:00] Hello, I'm Steph.

Melissa Brzycki [00:00:01] And I'm Mel.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:00:02] And this is East Asia for All, a podcast about East Asian pop culture and media.

Melissa Brzycki [00:00:07] If you're listening right now, you, like us, probably also have an addiction to East Asian films, cartoons, memes, music, and much, much more

Stephanie Montgomery [00:00:17] Between the two of us, we've lived on and off in China, Taiwan, and Japan since 2007.

Melissa Brzycki [00:00:22] We also both have PhDs in Chinese history and we're both working as professors in the Midwest.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:00:28] I'm at St. Olaf College in the Departments of History and Asian Studies,

Melissa Brzycki [00:00:31] And I teach history at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:00:35] So we're taking our love for East Asia, our experiences there and the knowledge we've gained in the ivory tower and making it available beyond our classroom walls.

Melissa Brzycki [00:00:47] In this episode of East Asia for All, we're talking about the 2016 documentary film Hooligan Sparrow by Wang Nanfu, which is available to stream on Netflix.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:00:58] The title is a reference to the well-known Chinese activist Ye Haiyan, better known by her Internet pseudonym Liumang Yan, or Hooligan Sparrow.

Melissa Brzycki [00:01:07] Ye Haiyan went viral in China in 2010 when she did sex work for free.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:01:12] Right. And she did this to call attention to both the dangerous and difficult working conditions of sex workers in China.

Melissa Brzycki [00:01:18] Where it's still illegal, and sex work is very stigmatized.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:01:22] But she also advocated for viewing sex work as useful labor.

Melissa Brzycki [00:01:26] But this documentary isn't actually about that.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:01:29] No. In fact, the filmmaker Wang Nanfu follows Ye Haiyan as she travels to Hainan to stir up public support for prosecuting and punishing a government official and a local principal who raped adolescent schoolgirls in a hotel.

Melissa Brzycki [00:01:43] Yeah, this was a very high profile case because the official and principal got off with pretty lenient charges. And we're going to discuss those details in the episode.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:01:53] Right. So the documentary ends up being more about the backlash and harassment that Ye Haiyan endures from the government as a result of this activism.

Melissa Brzycki [00:02:01] It's a rare glimpse into something we hear a lot about in the media: the experiences of Chinese political activists as they come up against new methods of repression and state surveillance.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:02:12] And today is really exciting because we have Dr. Gail Hershtatter on the podcast with us.

Melissa Brzycki [00:02:17] It's going to be a good one.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:02:18] Absolutely. Let's get to it.

Melissa Brzycki [00:02:32] So today on the podcast, we're very excited, we're going to be talking about the documentary Hooligan Sparrow, and to help us do that, we've invited Dr. Gail Hershtatter, to talk with us today. Gail is a professor of modern Chinese history at the University of California at Santa Cruz. And, Gail, would you like to further introduce your research and yourself?

Gail Hershtatter [00:02:53] Sure. I'm a historian of labor and gender in modern China, and I've done a lot of work on the history of prostitution in modern China, as well as, more recently work on rural women and how they understand the Chinese revolution.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:03:11] Yeah, wonderful. We're so excited to have you here today. And, you know, originally we were brainstorming what films we wanted to maybe talk to you about or what piece of work. And you suggested Hooligan Sparrow. So we are wondering if you could talk a little bit about why and why you think it's an interesting piece of work.

Gail Hershtatter [00:03:28] Hooligan Sparrow is really surprising because it features a woman who's well known as an activist for the rights of sex workers in contemporary China. But as it turns out, it's not really about her work on behalf of sex workers. It's more about how her work on behalf of a group of young adolescents who were kidnapped and raped ends up getting her in trouble with the authorities. But in a really interesting way, it is quite typical of a lot of the material that I looked at when I was doing research on prostitution, because it turns out if you start reading about prostitution, pretty soon things that people say connect to almost every other social problem there is. And so Hooligan Sparrow turned out to be that kind of a window. You start with someone who advocates for the rights and protection of sex workers. And pretty soon you're talking about the entire scope for political activism and speaking out and naming social problems across Chinese society. And that's quite typical of the way prostitution has worked as a way for people to talk about other social problems ever since the early 20th century.

Melissa Brzycki [00:04:43] So maybe we should talk then a little bit about the history of sex work in China. Could you give us a brief overview of how different governments in 20th-century China have treated that? And then also these the similarities that you are seeing here?

Gail Hershatter [00:04:57] I got interested in working on the history of prostitution in modern China because I started out as a labor historian. And along the way I saw this random statistic, two sets of random statistics. One had the number of women workers in a major Chinese city in the 1930s, and the other had the number of prostitutes. And by those estimates, which might not have been accurate, there were roughly twice as many prostitutes as there were women industrial workers. So I started thinking, if you want to know where the women are working, you better go enlarge your definition of what counts as work. And I started doing research on prostitution in Shanghai, China's biggest treaty port, before the revolution of 1949. And there were a number of social work kinds of surveys of sex workers. But really a lot of the information came in the form of guides for people who might want to go to different kinds of brothels, about how to tell one brothel from the next, how to impress high-class prostitutes who were known as courtesans, how to avoid embarrassing yourself and looking like a country bumpkin who would be made fun of by these sophisticated women who knew everything about how to conduct themselves, and how not to get pick pocketed by lower class streetwalkers. So there was a whole literature of how to fit in to being a Shanghai urbanite through the way you dealt with prostitutes. Then a little bit after that, there were successive campaigns on the part of different urban governments to try to put an end to prostitution, mostly wildly unsuccessful. And there was a lot of discussion among reformers about what does it mean that we have prostitution here? Is this a sign that Chinese women are demeaned? And is that a sign that China as a nation is demeaned? And so you start out talking about prostitution and pretty soon you're talking about the meaning of urbanity, sophistication, national strength, what the state is supposed to be doing, et cetera, et cetera. So it turned out to be - this is for the 1920s, 30s, 40s, actually, really starting even in the late 19th century, but accelerating in the early part of the 20th century - a really useful way to look at society by taking this as a kind of optic to focus on social problems. So I did a lot of work on that. And I was going to stop it in 1949 because it was well known that the Chinese Communist Party, which established the People's Republic in 1949, was not a fan of prostitution, thought it was a sign of the demeaning of women, wanted to get rid of it, along with other social problems such as opium dealing and opium addiction. And there was a big campaign in the 1950s to close down brothels, convince prostitutes that they had been exploited, retrain them for jobs and re-release them into society. And it didn't always go that smoothly, it turned out, because...

Stephanie Montgomery [00:08:01] Shocking [laughter].

Gail Hershatter [00:08:02] Well, some of them, the only families they'd ever known, because many of them had been trafficked as young girls from impoverished areas of the countryside and essentially raised by madams in brothels. It was the custom to address your madam as mama and everybody else in the brothel as your sister. And so as far as they were concerned, they were being separated from everybody they'd ever known as family. And it was going to be replaced by who knows what all of these rumors that the Communists were redistributing not only land, but women, rumors that they would be used as minesweepers to clear out mines on the way to try to retake Taiwan. All kinds of questions. And it didn't help when the Communist government made this sort of amazing decision to take very scarce penicillin supplies and use them to treat the very high rate of

syphilis among these women. But the women thought, many of them, that their blood was being drawn out and it was going to be used to replenish blood lost on the battlefield by the troops and that it was literally a form of vampirism. So when they got rounded up by the Communists, they cried, they screamed. A Communist official came in to talk to them about how they were going to be liberated. And they, and in the middle of it, it was lunchtime. They were served lunch. They all threw their food on the floor and just stood there wailing. I interviewed the guy who had been in charge of going to talk to them, and he said, you know, not a single one of these people thought that the Chinese Communist Party had come to liberate her. So I was going to end the book with that. And then I was working on this in the 1980s. And a funny thing started to happen, which is that prostitution started to reappear in China under the conditions of the post-Mao Zedong reforms, and so something which had been declared to be eliminated to great acclaim in the 1950s and about which there hadn't been very much written since then. And I should say China is a big place. I don't believe for a minute when someone says X has been eliminated, that that's an absolute step.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:10:07] But as you say, it was totally...

Melissa Brzycki [00:10:07] Much less visible.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:10:08] Yeah, exactly. But it was such a point of pride. It's something that's been mentioned to me multiple times about the Communist takeover in China is that this was a point of pride that they were able to eliminate prostitution.

Gail Hershatter [00:10:18] Right. And without eliminating prostitutes, that is by re-educating them and saying you might not have realized it at the time because it's the only life you knew, but you were oppressed and exploited and now you're going to make an honest living through your labor. Prostitution was not considered by the Communists to be sex work. It was a form of victimization. So nowhere in the world was prostitution talked about as sex work at that point in the 50s. So in the 1980s, when it started to come back under conditions of economic reform, where people were freer to move around more and the labor market loosened up, but also there was a lot of gender discrimination, it turned out to be one of the more lucrative things that women could do for a living, including women with a relatively low level of education, but also in some cases at the kind of high end of a hierarchy of prostitution, women who were in college or who were working as professionals. When that started to happen, the Chinese Communist state really didn't know what to do with it. And so suddenly, as I was going along trying to end my book, there was this explosion of sources about, what are we going to do with this social problem. Suddenly we've got this whole collection of women who "hate labor and love leisure." That was one of the most common phrases that was used about them. Obviously, labor is something you do that is honorable, for which you earn a wage, and sex work is - they didn't say sex work - prostitution is what you do if you are too lazy to labor. And the thing I heard a lot from people in the late 80s and early 90s when this was first emerging as a social question again was, we knew what to do with women who were doing this because they needed to do it to support their families and avoid starvation. We really don't know where these attitudes are coming from. But since the economic reforms went along with a big opening up to Western influences of all sorts and some Western investment, prostitution became regarded as one of those ugly social problems that comes in with degenerate social values associated with the West. And so the response was a series of what were called "strike hard campaigns," which is send out the cops to shut this down. And more or less ever since then, with loosening and tightening of various policies, there's

been a kind of constant war between the law enforcement apparatus and sex workers and their pimps and madams.

Melissa Brzycki [00:13:01] Well, I think that that situation that you're talking about, the post-reform rise in prostitution and sort of, the state's inability to stamp it out, even if it would like to, is the exact situation that we're seeing at the beginning of *Hooligan Sparrow*, not that the film deals that much with sex work, but at the beginning it does talk about *Hooligan Sparrow's* activism around sex workers.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:13:22] And it's really interesting to me, too, because I feel that the kind of really complex nature of who is a sex worker and this kind of tier, or like this almost hierarchical structure, that you're talking about historically is also something that Ye Haiyan talks about when she went to do her activist work, she said that she went to the areas that were the mostly migrant workers that were coming in to visit sex workers and as low as two U.S. dollars per visit. And so there is still this kind of range and also what counts as sex work and who's considered a sex worker. If you get gifts and kind of a relationship in exchange for what is kind of like sex work, is that sex work as well? It's a very complex relationship, but it's very visible still in China. I feel like there definitely been moments when I have been living in China that I was pretty surprised sometimes at how visible sex workers were considering the stigma.

Gail Hershatter [00:14:22] Well, there are really interesting historical parallels because the hierarchy of prostitution, the difference between courtesans and streetwalkers and everything in between that you see earlier in the 20th century has emerged in new forms and different kinds of hierarchies. If you're providing sexual services to one person in return for an apartment and a BMW and et cetera, et cetera, is that prostitution? It would have been a mistress or a concubine under earlier arrangements. But the law doesn't permit those things, and they are not socially sanctioned categories³. So it often gets thought of as a form of prostitution now. But also there's this other thing that has to do with what's the relationship between the state and the practice of prostitution. And before 1949, there were lots of different local policies about prostitution. And there was a real contradiction because the idea was this is bad. It makes us look unmodern. Of course, every society has had prostitution, so unclear how that got it got installed as a criterion. But it makes China look bad. It makes China look weak. We've got to get rid of it. But it's a huge source of revenue, taxing brothels, taxing prostitutes, collecting fines from people. All of these things generated revenue for financially strapped local governments. So that turned out to be a big problem because one after another in the 1930s, cities would announce we're going to outlaw prostitution or we're going to outlaw all prostitution except licensed prostitution. And we're charging for licenses and we're limiting the number of licenses and then gradually we'll withdraw the licenses. And by that time, we can redirect all the women to something else. And of course, what ended up happening is the unlicensed or what was called the dark or hidden or secret sector of providing sex work would just burgeon. And then there were counties that were getting a third or a half of their revenue from taxes on prostitution. And there was no way that they were going to allow that to that revenue stream to dry up. So the parallel now, which you see in *Hooligan Sparrow*, is that clearly patronizing prostitutes - in this case, it's a particularly awful case because it's really about kidnaping a number of 11 to 14 year olds and hauling them off for officials to have sex with them. The allegations in this case were that this was a form of bribe to officials who, for one reason or another, were attracted to adolescent girls. And so the minute you start looking at this particular situation, you're looking at a kind of nexus of power who gets to control what kind of resources. But even if you're looking at garden variety attempts to police prostitution on the part of law enforcement right now, it's not

exactly a crime in the sense that it's covered under criminal law. It's considered an administrative offense. And there it says clients and, the law says - it's the public security law - says clients and prostitutes can be fined a certain amount or they can be detained for a certain length of time. But it is really completely up to the cops to decide how to enforce and with what degree of strictness. And, of course, that just opens the door to protection payments, bribes, women being more likely to be like locked up than clients are because the clients tend to be more well-heeled and can pay the fines, and a whole host of factors that end up really affecting the quality of life and safety of the lives of these women because local authorities are empowered to do what they want in the way they enforce this. It's exactly the kind of revenue tangle that you see before the revolution, and it's back in a slightly different form now.

Melissa Brzycki [00:18:25] I want to go back to one of the things you're talking about with this case and with the different ways that these girls are talked about, the way that it seems to be talked about in all of the English language things that I've been seeing is that it's talking about the rape of young girls. But at least from what I understand of the legal context in China, there are two different laws that could apply if someone were to, I think we could just use the word rape, but have sex with an underage person, and they seem to incur very different penalties, and it's incentivizing the portrayal of these, you know, girls as as prostitutes, basically, from what I can tell.

Gail Hershatter [00:19:07] Right. So basically, rape of someone under 14 can be punished by very severe penalties up to and including a life sentence or a death sentence. Engaging in prostitution with an underage girl, someone under the age of 14, can result in a sentence of five to 15 years and there has been a lot of debate about this since, when is an underage prostitute, not also and prior to that, an underage girl? Why is there a hierarchy of these? But it looks as though what happened in the particular case that was the occasion for the documentary *Hooligan Sparrow*. It looks as though people were being tried for engaging in prostitution with underage girls and therefore subject to the lesser penalties. And that was one of the things that both parents in the community, who were very intimidated by the police, but very angry, and these outside activists, including Ye Haiyan the so-called *Hooligan Sparrow*, were enraged about what kind of a loophole is this? This loophole needs to be closed.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:20:10] And I think in general, that's another major theme of the documentary that we wanted to discuss, is the treatment or the experiences of activists in China. Because as you said, you know, originally when I was watching the documentary, when Mel and I were watching it together, one of the things as it concluded, we thought, well, what is this documentary really about? You know, what is it about? And it's so rich, as you said, it draws on so many different themes. But one of the major themes, we think maybe one of the major points, was really about being an activist in China and really was about suppression of activism. And maybe we could talk a little bit about that, how activists are treated in China. This is the big conversation all over. You know, internationally.

Gail Hershatter [00:20:56] I think I want to say something about what little I know about Ye Haiyan first. Prior to this, because what she was well-known for was advocating for the rights of prostitutes, sex workers. And she was very active in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, pushing on a number of fronts. One was for news coverage, often says "legalization of prostitution." But I actually think it makes more sense to call it decriminalization of prostitution, that is, take away the penalties for this. And that accords with what some scholars have found about the legal consciousness and self understanding of prostitutes

themselves, where they say, look, we are providing a service, we're service providers, there's a demand for this service. We shouldn't be stigmatized for this. She was also trying to call attention to the various forms of abuse that prostitutes suffered from pimps and madams who took large percentages of their earnings from clients who might physically abuse or even rape or murder them in extreme cases and from the police around this collection of fines and taking of bribes and everything else. And she seems to have honed her protest repertoire, which she seems to have in common with various other feminist activists in China, where you will show up with signs and information that basically, and this kind of poses a conundrum for the state, basically say, claim your legal rights. In this case, in the case that's dealt with in Hooligan Sparrow, it's that you're not supposed to be raping young children, but with sex workers, it was like there is not supposed to be bribery, there's not supposed to be abuse. There's not supposed to be coercive behavior around forcing prostitutes not to have their clients use condoms because there's an HIV-AIDS dimension to this. And she was saying some of the laws have to be changed and some of the laws need to be enforced to protect the rights of the persons because prostitutes are people, too. So that was the background and it was the reason why I initially got interested in her. She did this thing in 2012 where she announced she was giving away sex for free to migrant workers because they needed it, because they were working in very exploited conditions and had very little money, and because she wanted to call attention to both how little they were making and how little the women who provided sexual services to them were making. And she made big announcements about it. And it went on just for a couple of days. But she's the kind of, she has a real genius for the gesture that is going to collect a lot of attention. And of course, it was happening at a time where social media in China had also really taken off. So every time she posted something, every time she held up a sign, it went viral and it went all over the place. And also, this work attracted the attention of some very prominent people, including the artist Ai Weiwei. And she did some actions with him. So she had a whole track record of showing up with other organizers, basically to demand that the state live up to its own promises of legal protection for its citizens. And that's what she started to do in this case that's covered in Hooligan Sparrow about this case of the kids being kidnaped. It happened that there was a young filmmaker, Wang Nanfu, who has gone to school in the U.S. but had gone back to China for the summer and who knew about her sex work activism and wanted to talk to her some more and follow her around. And this thing unfolded over the course of the summer. So it got captured on film. It ended up not being a story about sex workers. It ended up being a story about how if you stand up and call upon the state to enforce its own laws and pass out the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, you may be persecuted, kicked out of your house and put under surveillance, driven from one community to another, had your possessions put out in the road, be physically threatened, have your kid be physically threatened. All these things happened to Ye Haiyan during that summer, and this filmmaker happened to be there in a very intrepid and ingenious manner, recording a lot of it, including when cops were interrogating her and she had a mic in the pocket of her athletic shorts with a long skirt on over it, including filming with a camera hidden in a pair of glasses. And so you see a lot of things upside down and unclear sound and technically awful, but completely compelling and terrifying as she recreates the kind of pressure that can be brought to bear on people. So long way of getting back to your question, what about citizen activism? I don't think that the central state in China has any interest in 11 to 14 year olds being kidnaped and essentially raped and then having things prosecuted under the statute for against having sex with underage girls. I don't think it's about that. I think what this has in common with various other forms of protest is, any time a bunch of citizens show up and take things into their own hands and especially do it in a social media savvy way, it makes the state very nervous because this is an initiative that could easily, from the state's point of view, spin out of control, and that is not under their

control and that they didn't predict and they didn't know that she was going to show up with four other people and hold signs and yell in this community on Hainan Island where this case happened; she wasn't from Hainan Island. It made an impression on people locally. It made the media, and it infuriated the local officials who harassed her and detained her and then basically had her expelled from the community, hired thugs to hang around outside and threaten her, had people try to break into her apartment and bang on the door, all of which is filmed and so forth. That's local interest. But nationally, there is no support for this kind of activism either because it always has the potential to turn into something else. And this is not a state that wants uncontrolled, unsupervised, undirected social protest, even social protest that is saying "obey the law of the land, enforce the law of the land," it doesn't matter what you're saying, it matters that you were saying it. And that's really, it's often been a theme in China since 1949, but it has definitely gotten... This is a period of extremely tight control over the last five years or so, and it is bolstered by more sophisticated surveillance equipment and use of databases than ever before. So whenever Ye Haiyan, Hooligan Sparrow, goes to a new community and rents an apartment, suddenly within five minutes, the police know that she's there and chase her. That would not have been as true before.

Melissa Brzycki [00:28:25] I just want to mention that you were talking about one of the tactics is to call upon the state to enforce its own laws. And that that is also a tactic of other feminist activists like the Feminist Five, who then received very similar treatment, the interrogation, arrest, detention, harassment, et cetera, et cetera.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:28:43] Right. And if you did not know a little bit about this context, you would not expect that. You would not expect that kind of suppression from folks like the Feminist Five or Ye Haiyan and others. Because there is this, I think that, you know, the People's Republic of China has made quite a name for itself, unfortunately, because of this suppression, right, of activists voices. But if someone's calling to enforce the law, this is not the reaction you would necessarily-

Melissa Brzycki [00:29:10] You would think that's a very, very benign protest. Not even necessarily a protest.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:29:15] Right.

Gail Hershatter [00:29:16] Right. And in this case, I think the state is really taking a risk if Ye Haiyan is standing up there advocating for the rights of sex workers. Sex workers are socially stigmatized. Many people think, who cares about them. If she's standing up and advocating for the right of 11 to 14 year olds to expect the protection of the law and not to be kidnaped and raped, it's a little hard to position yourself as stopping that protest without sounding like you're advocating the activity she's protesting against. So this is a really extreme version of that. And I think it suggests a level of fear of popular social protest that's quite extreme.

Melissa Brzycki [00:30:00] I remember that in at least one of the protests, I think it was outside of the school where this had happened, Ye Haiyan was very explicit about the fact that she was fairly certain that they would not get arrested at this point because it would create an even. it would look even worse for the state. And so thus this was at least temporarily, a slightly safe position for them to be in, because they didn't have to worry about being arrested at that moment because it would have looked so awful if they had been arrested for protesting the rape of girls.

Gail Hershatter [00:30:31] Right. One of the most disturbing little footnotes to Hooligan Sparrow at the end, she shows many of the people that she's interviewed - the filmmaker does - and explains when they were detained from when to when. And there is this one woman lawyer whom she has been following quite closely as she files petitions and brings lawsuits and engages in activity that is completely about enforcing the law of the land to protect individual people's rights not to be raped and trafficked and so forth. And she had been in detention since this film was shot in the summer of 2013. She was detained in 2015 and has only recently been charged with subverting the state. And I don't know what the outcome has been of her trial. I haven't been following it. But she is in that group of people that are loosely classified as human rights lawyers or lawyer activists who have been locked up in China for doing absolutely legal things, according to the statutes that have been passed by the government that is coming after them for seeking protection under those statutes. So it's not, it's a very distressing situation. It does kind of illustrate my point, though, that you start looking at sex work and pretty soon you're looking at all of the major points of social tension in a society including who counts as powerful and who doesn't. And I guess one other piece of this is these kids are supposedly being used, it is said in the film, as sexual bribes for powerful men. That's a really extreme version of a kind of practice that went on historically, also where prostitutes, in addition to providing sexual services, provided men a means to socialize with each other, exchange favors, discuss business, each with somebody on their arm. And it's a kind of conviviality that often goes along with drinking or more recently, also karaoke, that allows powerful men to make deals with each other and pass favors back and forth. And often those favors involve access to adult women. I think it's more surprising, less acceptable, and probably less common for it to involve underage girls. But I'm sure this is not the only case. In fact, there are several other cases mentioned in the coverage on Hooligan Sparrow that are that are famous cases and Guangxi and other places of having to do with trafficking of underage children.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:33:15] Yeah, that's one thing that really surprised me about Hooligan Sparrow, is that they seem to suggest that this was a almost common practice, to imply that. And I was very surprised by that.

Gail Hershatter [00:33:27] It's hard to know. It's really hard to know. It's certainly not the only time it's ever happened. My guess is that it is one extreme on a much wider nexus of trading favors that include access to women. And this is another place where the stance of the state is very convoluted because there is a major campaign against corruption going on. And one of the things it's about is, you will not treat this guy to a banquet as a bribe. You will not send him expensive bottles of liquor or cartons of cigarettes. And you hear complaints all over China that restaurants have seen a real drop in their business now that people aren't using restaurants to bribe each other. So the state is on this real anti-corruption jag and at the same time locking up people who call them to account for permitting this to go on.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:34:22] Yeah, in the age of Xi Jinping, it really, this anti-corruption bent is very clear and something that's discussed quite often. We actually were wondering if we could shift gears a little bit.

Melissa Brzycki [00:34:37] I had I think one more question that's a little bit tangential. You talked a little bit about how skilled Ye Haiyan is at creating these very viral protests. And one of the signs that she holds up at one point, and I don't actually think it's part of one of the protests, it's, she holds it up on the beach when they're just taking photos of each other. So I'm not sure that it was part of a public protest. But she holds up a sign and it says, and I should have written down the quote, but it says something to the effect of, the

Women's Federation is the Women's Federation in name only; it doesn't actually advocate for women. And so I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit about what the Women's Federation is and what's happening with that in all of these issues that are involving women and women's issues right now in contemporary China.

Gail Hershatter [00:35:23] It's a really good and complicated question. So the Women's Federation is the organization that was set up by the Communists before 1949 and then made part of their national government after 1949 to mobilize women, communicate state directives to them, also raise women's status, ensure their political rights, et cetera. And it has often been derided as just a transmission belt for Chinese Communist Party policy to people, and towards the end of the Mao years, if you would ask anybody who was under the age of 40 about the Women's Federation, they'd say, oh, that, that's the organization that targets my mother, that has nothing to do with me. No one wanted to be identified as mobilized by the Women's Federation. They'd rather be mobilized in their capacity as a worker, or an army person, or anything but. However, we know a couple of things about the Women's Federation that complicate that picture of, they're just a mouthpiece for the Party. One is that some of the older women revolutionaries who first got involved in founding the Chinese Communist Party did a lot of behind the scenes work to try to push what, I don't know what they would call it, but which I would call a more feminist agenda on the part of the state, trying to strengthen women's rights in the Marriage Law, trying to push back when various groups said women should be sent back home just to support their husbands, arguing really for women's equal political and economic rights. So behind the scenes in the Women's Federation, there's been a certain amount of arguing and activity, some of which we know about because of scholarly work that various people have done. Wang Zheng at Michigan has published some articles about this, among other people. Also, if you look at what the Women's Federation did during the period of post-Mao economic reforms, a lot of them have been really concerned with how can women get some economic traction in a situation where gender discrimination may not be legal, but it's absolutely widespread. How can women become more self-sufficient? It's tried to push women to improve their skills and become more entrepreneurial. At the same time, the Women's Federation also has not agitated particularly in favor of protecting sex workers, because it's one of these things that's just out of the purview of what's considered something women should be doing. To further complicate that, different levels of the Women's Federation in different locations of the Women's Federation, some are more activist and inventive than others. So when Ye Haiyan stands up there on the beach and says the Women's Federation doesn't really represent women, what she's saying in this case is, in this case in Hainan, here's this group that's supposed to be protecting the rights of women. And the Women's Federation often gets tasked with protecting the rights of children while they're at it, because women and children often get lumped together. And she's saying, what kind of protector is this? Why are they not pushing for harsher charges against these people that were accused of trafficking these underage girls? They're supposed to represent the interests of women, and they are failing us. So, again, what she's saying is, there is the state organization, just like there is this law. Keep your own promises. And having a voice from outside the government apparatus say that to people inside the government apparatus is the thing that apparently many state authorities find very threatening. It's not the content of what she's calling on them to do. It's the fact that she's calling on them to do something from the outside.

Melissa Brzycki [00:39:13] Well, Steph, I think you had a very different type of question.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:39:18] So we like to wrap things up sometimes with recommendations. Sometimes the piece of work that we choose to discuss in the podcast

is not one that we would always recommend. Sometimes it's a little more complicated than that. And we discuss it as a leaping off point, you know, into other conversations. I think we would probably all recommend Hooligan Sparrow. So it's fantastic. It's streaming on Netflix. It's definitely worth a watch. But we were wondering if there are any other pieces of popular culture or recommendations, even scholarship on this, you know, issue of sex work or activism that you could point our listeners to.

Gail Hershatter [00:39:56] OK, there is a novel. It's not that easy to get hold of because the English-language translation was published in Australia, and I don't think there's an edition here, called Northern Girls that is about prostitutes written by a woman author who spent some time with prostitutes and talks about their lives in great detail on, not on sex work, but on related topics. Leta Hong Fincher has a new book coming out. In fact, it might,

Melissa Brzycki [00:40:31] I think it might be out.

Gail Hershatter [00:40:32] It might be out like last week called Betraying Big Brother, which is about the feminist five and about the rise of social media savvy feminist protest fueled by women in their 20s and 30s mainly, and about the degree to which the state authorities are threatened by it. And it's got a lot of the same dynamics that are showing up in this 2013 film. This film; it recreates the emotional character of what it feels like to be pursued by violent men who may be sent by the state but who are perfectly happy to tear you limb from limb. You know, I mean, there are more than a few scenes of people rattling the doorways and banging on the screen and yelling, "I will break your legs if I ever see you again" and so forth. And they are actually on the receiving end of those threats. And in that way, it evokes a much larger social problem. This is not just about prostitution. It's not even about child rape. It's about the nature of political authority, both sanctioned and, the central state looking away while letting local authorities enforce things as they will. That's frankly kind of terrifying, worth looking at.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:41:51] Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. I think our listeners will enjoy this conversation very much. We're so happy to have you on East Asia for All.

Melissa Brzycki [00:42:00] Yes. And thank you for the recommendation. We're really glad that we ended up doing it on Hooligan Sparrow.

Gail Hershatter [00:42:05] I'm really happy to have had this conversation. And I look forward to seeing how you make this into a coherent conversation.

Melissa Brzycki [00:42:12] Oh, it was. [laughter] It won't take much effort.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:42:19] If you like East Asia for all, you could really help us out by telling others about the podcast and leaving a review on iTunes,

Melissa Brzycki [00:42:26] We're lucky that we don't need funding or donations right now, but we could use your support in getting the word out. It helps other people find the podcast.

Stephanie Montgomery [00:42:34] For show notes and more information about the podcast, visit our website: eastasiaforall dot com. You can also find us on Twitter @ EastAsia4All. Thanks.

