

Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies
The People's Republic of China at 75 Series
October 4, 2024

Film Screening | *Remembering the 1980s*

TIANANMEN

"We Respect Life, Just as We Respect History."

Yuhua Wang, Professor of Government, Harvard University

**Rowena Xiaoqing He, Senior Research Fellow, University of Texas Austin;
author, *Tiananmen Exiles: Voices of the Struggle for Democracy***

**Sam Maclean, Communications Manager, Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies;
former film critic, *Slant Magazine* and *In Review Online***

Tiananmen's 8 parts will screen in groups of two, with short breaks:

12:00 PM Introduction, followed by Part 1: **The Old City** (56 min.), about survivors of the imperial court, including interviews with the last living imperial eunuch and Puyi's family members, and Part 2: **Residences** (51 min.), which explores everyday life in courtyard homes.

2:15 PM Part 3: **On the Street** (52 min.), about forms of commerce and social activities, and Part 4: **On Stage** (54 min.), a survey of theater actors, street performers, and rock musicians.

4:15 PM Part 5: **Going Places** (48 min.), about intellectual life at universities and inside private enterprises, and Part 6 **Guest Performers** (48 min.), on foreigners who live and work in Beijing.

6:00 PM Part 7: **On the Way** (50 min.), about entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry, ad agencies and models, and Part 8: **Memories** (1 hour), a look at a history of sociopolitical unrest.

*The final episodes will be followed by a Zoom Q+A with
Rowena Xiaoqing He and Tiananmen co-director, Shi Jian.*

Statement from CHEN Jue (陈爵), co-director of *Tiananmen*

September, 2024

As a co-creator of *Tiananmen*, I would like to first express our sincere gratitude to Harvard University and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies—a prestigious institution with a long history of pursuing truth—and to the Center’s Executive Director, Dorinda Elliott. It is an immense honor to have the opportunity to revisit and discuss this documentary, which emerged at a crucial turning point in China's transformational era and holds significant symbolic meaning on multiple levels. Showcasing it here, at this time, in such a meaningful way, is invaluable.

At this time of great uncertainty, re-screening *Tiananmen* invites us to engage in active dialogue with its non-fiction content and its intricate ties to a complex historical past. It allows us to revisit and understand China’s transformative era, the multifaceted perspectives on Beijing, and the complexities of life during that time. The film also reveals the subtle signs, brewing in everyday life, that preceded the significant yet largely unrepresented events which erupted unexpectedly. In capturing such profound, large-scale moments—despite the near impossibility of doing so at the time—*Tiananmen* stands as a testament to the filmmakers’ unwavering determination to document and reflect on these monumental changes, amidst adversity.

The experience of watching this film today might evoke a sense of being transported to another world, yet filled with a blend of emotions—intimate, nostalgic, even humorous. The most inspiring and meaningful aspects, particularly the historical connections and reflections on Beijing, China, and life during that era, will resonate with today’s China, the modern world, and all of us. This reflection is made possible thanks to this Center’s thoughtful curation.

I would like to thank Professor Yuhua Wang and Dr. Rowena Xiaoqing He for their commentary, which will provide essential context for understanding this work. *Tiananmen*, with its multifaceted narrative, intricate issues, and portrayal of a transformative period, can be difficult for younger viewers—those who did not live through that era—to fully grasp. The background of many filmed subjects, the filmmakers’ multi-perspective observations, and the limitations of expression during that time may leave today’s audience feeling distanced or confused. As a result, the historical, social, and human significance may seem increasingly obscure.

This is why we are deeply grateful to these two scholars, whose profound knowledge of China—and, in some cases, firsthand experiences of Beijing—opens windows of understanding and guides us through a richly rewarding discussion. Their perspectives bridge the past and the present, allowing *Tiananmen's* three-year chronicle of Beijing to reveal its ongoing relevance and meaning today. Their insights allow us to better grasp the historical figures, lives, and moments documented in the eight-part series, along with the personal experiences and challenges that defined this transformative period. Through their efforts, *Tiananmen* takes us back to the memories of Beijing’s last nobles and the everyday lives of common people, as portrayed in *The*

Old City (Part 1) and *Residences* (Part 2). The documentary captures the realities of Beijing from 1988 to 1991, showing fleeting moments, struggles, frustrations, and hopes that once seemed possible—all while inviting your reflection and participation in this meaningful dialogue today.

We also must express our appreciation to Sam Maclean, a young scholar who has a passion for understanding China—like his renowned great, great uncle, Edgar Snow—and has been conducting in-depth research on Chinese documentaries and independent productions from the 1980s to the beginning of the new century. This screening would not have been possible without his unremitting efforts—and he can also introduce our work from the perspective of documentary aesthetics. Without Sam’s efforts in preserving *Tiananmen* and investigating its background during the isolation of the pandemic, today’s important screening would be unimaginable.

It’s necessary to point out that the biggest difference between *Tiananmen* and various excellent Chinese documentaries made during the same period, inside and outside the state system, is that *Tiananmen* itself is a work of self-transformation, transitioning from a production with rich institutional resources, a collective work, to an independent production mode, and evolving further into a work shaped by both the public sentiment of the era and the personal vision of the author, as guided by the will of the filmmaker as a witness. This is the key reason why it stands apart from—and surpasses—most documentary works of its time, which often focus on single events, characters, or issues. In contrast, this work offers a broader social scope, a larger scale of character documentation, a multidimensional perspective on change, a more comprehensive portrayal of the era’s ecology, and greater innovation in its aesthetic expression.

This documentary, and its unique position, subsequently led to the formation of SWYC (*Structure, Wave, Youth, Cinema*), an experimental film group composed of Shi Jian, Kuang Yang, Wang Zijun, and me. This creative alliance represented shared ideas and pursuits, and it played a pivotal role in the development of China’s New Documentary Movement. This movement brought together the most important documentary filmmakers of the era, both inside and outside of the state system, and resulted in the 1991 Beijing New Documentary Seminar.

When Sam visited us in Beijing this August, a clear and captivating historical thread began to unspool—carefully and logically revealing a possibility and hope that left a profound impression on us. No matter how challenging or silent the struggle, with a desire for truth, confidence in life, and loyalty to core values, the act of recording, reflecting, and expressing the enduring lives, people, and events shaped by unwavering beliefs will shine through. Their brilliance and power can transcend time, break through barriers, and defy forgetting.

Just like the scenes, faces, voices, and moments captured in *Tiananmen*, this remarkable screening today will allow these echoes to resonate with all viewers at Harvard. I believe that the images, sounds, and stories in *Tiananmen* will resonate with audiences for years to come.

Thank you,
CHEN Jue

作为《天安门》系列的联合创作者，首先应当特别感谢历史悠久、声名显赫而且以求真作为永恒目标的哈佛这座伟大学府中享有盛誉的费正清中心，和贵中心执行主任、尊敬的艾鼎德（Dinda Elliott）女士，能够使这样一部在中国转型时代第一个极其重要的转折点上应运而生、并且在诸多层面上都具有特殊标志性意义的纪录片之作，在这里、在这样的時候并且以这样完整的方式获得重温和探讨，是无比宝贵、无比重要、令我们深引为殊荣的。因为这恰恰在今天这个充满了多重不确定性的时间点上，创造了一种新颖的可能：即从与过去的历史过程复杂对应的非虚构影像内容的积极对话中，开辟重识乃至寻获某种相关的确定性价值与意义的前景。对于今日重映这部作品来说，也就意味着理解那个历史性年代的转型中国及其丰富的初始面向，理解当时的北京状况以及多种多样的人生时刻，理解社会演变中的表层冲动和各种境遇下的复杂困扰，理解那期间骤然爆发但无法呈现的重大事件在日常生活中可能积蓄和萌动的种种征象，以及理解在那场巨大转变和重重困遏中像《天安门》这样在当年来说几无可能、但依然坚定地纪录并思考着这样庞大规模且具深度性内容的纪实选择……。它们在今日重映时的可能观感，也许会有种恍若隔世但依然饱含着令人倍感亲切甚至稚嫩好笑、却也是五种杂陈的复杂感受；而其中有关那时北京、那时中国以及那时有价值的人生，之于今日中国、今日世界、今日我们大家的历史关联和可能的思考，其所有最具启发、最意味深长的部分，将毫无保留地归功于由贵中心举办的这次令人感慨万千的影像回首！

继之应当感谢即将盛情介绍我们这部作品、在各自学术领域建树卓著、令人尊敬的王裕华（Yuhua Wang）教授和何晓清（Rowena Xiaoqing He）教授。因为像《天安门》这样内容庞杂、所涉错综、具有转型期复杂因素交相影响的进行性特征、而且是多体例组合形态的综合纪实之作，对于未经历过那个年代的年轻观者来说，是会颇感费解的；加之许多被采拍事物的际遇与背景，拍摄者多角度观察取证时的思虑与冲动，以及在那个特殊年代许多影像表达上的曲折选择，对于不了解那个年代和当时各种条件限定与表达限定的今日观者来说，也是极有可能会进一步感到距离和困惑，有时甚至会疑窦丛生，而致使其中重要的历史、社会或人文方面的时代信息益发显得模糊。凡此种种，就更加要仰仗于拥有中国背景甚至是北京经验的两位教授，能够从既往到今天的历史视野，而且从各自相彰、精彩不同的学术思想角度，让《天安门》这场历时三年的北京叙述，打开它对于今天的理解仍富价值和意义的窗口，并引导这场令人鼓舞的探讨和对话收获丰盛。这将使《天安门》从《老城》和《平房》中的末代显贵与平民生活的记忆开始，让这八集所记录并成为 1988 到 1991 年北京状况和北京生存见证者的人们、他们那些一去不复返的生活时刻、他们的意义、他们的挫折、他们曾经可能的未来与希望……，一起面对来自你们今日的注视与问候！

接下来应当感谢如其著名的曾祖辈人物、时代记者埃德加·斯诺先生那样怀抱着对于中国的理解热情、多年来专注于上世纪 80 年代到新世纪初中国纪录与独立影像的深入研究、为促成今天这场意义非凡的影像回首不懈努力和奔走、也将从电影美学的价值角度介绍我们这部作品的年轻学者赵天影（英文全名）先生。没有他直到广泛阻隔的疫情期间还在为集合这部作品的所有片集、不停顿查访相关背景情况所付出的辛苦，今日这场重要而宝贵的影像回首是无法想象的。因为与体制内外同时期各种纪录片佳作最大的不同在于，《天安门》这部作品本身，就是集丰富的体制资源和后来转向独立色彩的集体制作、对于时代的公共性诉求和快速演变为以拍摄者同时也是见证者意志下的作者诉求为主导的、多种因素影响并造成的自我转型之作；这也是它在社会辐射广度、人物纪实规模、变革观察的多维性、时代生态的整体性乃至影像表达方式和美学创造幅度与深度上，与同时期大部分以单一事件、单一人物、单一问题为主题的纪录片作品大相迥异也有所超越的主要缘由。这种一定要诉之以见证者广泛而坚定的时代思考的纪实方式和美学成果，迅速造成了由时间、我、邝扬和同时期在北京执导《京城散记》纪录系列的王子军先生共同组成 SWYC（结构浪潮青年电影实验小组）也即这同一理念和追求的创作同盟的诞生；进而由《天安门》和我们 SWYC 的影响推动，更成功促成了集结体制内外最重要纪录片作者、以 1991 年北京新纪录片研讨会为标志的“中国新纪录运动”的启动。当赵天影先生在今年 8 月的北京相会中，向我们由此指出《天安门》在那一时期这种特殊重要性的时候，这条清晰而迷人的历史线索，就如审慎却又逻辑地豁然展开着，它在默默昭示着一种令人深醒的可能和希望：无论身处于多么艰难、沉寂的困境当中，以对真的渴求、对生命的信心、对价值的忠守，去纪录去思考去表达那种按照根本上是值得的信念和法则不屈地演进着的生活、人与事物，它们不可磨灭的光彩和力量，必能够穿越岁月乃至人为的屏障，战胜遗忘并得到回响。这正如《天安门》中那些场景、那些面容、那些声音、那些时刻，即将在贵中心这场美好重温中、在哈佛的诸位观看者朋友们那里，所得到的那样！

在此真诚祝愿这场时隔已久、意涵丰富的影像重温取得圆满成功！

并以谦卑、友爱的心情祝愿各位平安快乐！

陈爵

2024 年 9 月