

AC FILMS PRESENTS:

BEIJING SPRING

北京之春



Directed by Andy Cohen
Co-Director Gaylen Ross

Feature Documentary Film
100 minutes

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Hidden 16mm Film Footage Revealed for the First Time after 40 Years

Reminiscent of what is happening in Hong Kong today, this is a story about underground film-making, radical art, and censorship. At Democracy Wall in Beijing in 1978, The “Stars”, a group of self-taught artists (including a young Ai Weiwei) challenged propaganda art by showing their new art that championed individuality and free expression, often exposing the inhumanity of the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, editor and essayist Wei Jingsheng posted his essays calling for democracy. Further provoked by the Stars exhibits and protest demonstrations, the authorities cracked down, closing Democracy Wall, imprisoning many, and slamming the door on this brief period of reform. Recording it all was a daring young filmmaker named Chi Xiaoning. Hidden for decades, Chi’s footage of these exciting times will now be featured in *Beijing Spring* for the first time ever.

SYNOPSIS

Through never-before-seen footage hidden from the authorities for thirty-five years, *Beijing Spring* chronicles China’s first democracy movement and forgotten struggle for freedom of expression.

It was 1979 and reform was in the air. Mao Zedong had died a few years earlier, and the nation began to reawaken after 30 years of oppression that had claimed over 50 million lives. As the Bamboo curtain lifted, young, daring voices demanded the right to free speech, heralding in what became known as the Beijing Spring.

Deng Xiaoping, the new “paramount leader,” experimented with economic reforms and free speech, and even tolerated the open posting of liberal ideas and avant-garde art in one easily monitored local in central Beijing — the Democracy Wall was the name given to this long brick wall running along Xidan Street, just west of Tiananmen Square.

At the heart of the film are the “Stars”, a group of self-taught artists (including a 21 year-old Ai Weiwei) whose modernist forms and content expressed individualism and exposed the inhumanity of the Cultural Revolution, challenging the official “red, bright and shiny,” propaganda art. A year later, after instigating these freedoms, Deng, fearing the activists’ calls for democracy

would threaten his grip on power, ordered the government to crack down. He closed the Democracy wall, shutting the door on this brief moment of reform. Among modern China's first Democracy leaders, Wei Jingsheng and Xu Wenli are shown before their arrests and nearly two decades-long imprisonment.

Now, forty years later, ***Beijing Spring*** reveals the story of the Democracy Wall, and of those who lived it — the painters, sculptors, poets, photographers and activists who pushed the boundaries of art and social reform — with reams of never-before-seen 16mm footage, hidden from the Chinese authorities for four decades. For the first time ever, we see the police forcefully remove the Stars artwork from an ad hoc exhibit hung on a fence outside Beijing's National Gallery. A few days later, on National Day, the Stars and the Democracy Wall activists organized a protest demonstration — the first since the Communists seized power. Thousands came to march through the streets of Beijing, risking their own freedom.

One courageous filmmaker, Chi Xiaoning, stood atop Democracy Wall, camera in hand, recording it all in plain sight of the police. They eventually surrounded Chi and demanded he expose the film. Chi pulled out the unused portions of film, tricking the police into believing he exposed all the negatives. Fearing for the safety of his friends, Chi hid the 47 minutes of salvaged footage in a confidante's home, swearing him to secrecy. After Chi's untimely death, no one knew the whereabouts of the footage as it had been kept underground, passed from friend to friend as time passed. After years of searching, the film's director, Andy Cohen, was able to track down Chi's film, now shown for the first time ever in ***Beijing Spring***.

These brave voices of ***Beijing Spring*** opened a unique window onto a pivotal, and officially censored moment in Chinese history that resonates not only for today's democracy movement in Hong Kong, but also for all young artists and activists who have the courage to fight any system in any country that tries to suppress the voices of its generation from speaking out against injustice and persecution.

ANDY COHEN

Director, Writer, Producer



Andrew "Andy" Cohen is an independent filmmaker and journalist. Much of his work is investigative and human rights-based.

He produced, directed or wrote several award-winning documentaries such as *Dealers among Dealers* (1996), *Killing Kasztner* (2008), *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (2012), *The World Before Her* (2012), *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016), *Human Flow* (2017), *Ximei* (2019), which were shown at the FIFDH Geneva, Venice Film Festival, Telluride, Tribeca, Traverse City, Toronto International Film Festival, Berlin Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival among others, and broadcast on PBS, BBC, UK Ch4, ARTE, Netflix, and Amazon.

Cohen also directed and wrote a nine-part series of short films on China's leading contemporary artists in collaboration with Art Asia Pacific for which he is a contributing editor. He is currently working on three feature length documentaries that are in post production: *Talking Tacheles* (2022), *The Village Gate* (2023), *Title Shot* (2023), *The Tibetan Void* (2023).

GAYLEN ROSS

Co-Director, Writer, Producer



Gaylen Ross has directed, produced, and written award-winning documentary films for over 25 years, premiering in national and international film festivals. She has had two films previously in the Berlin International Film Festival: the Emmy award-winning ***Blood Money: Switzerland's Nazi Gold***, a feature-length documentary on the Swiss Banks and the Holocaust accounts, and her film on diamond dealers ***Dealers Among Dealers*** which aired on PBS' **P.O.V** and is considered the only inside look into this very cloistered world. Among her films, ***Killing Kasztner: The Jew Who Dealt With Nazis***, was an official selection of the Toronto International Film Festival, broadcast BBC Storyville, shown in 11 countries and has enjoyed an unprecedented theatrical release in the US, Israel and France. It was named by the **LA Times** as one of the best documentary films of 2010. Her latest film ***Caris' Peace*** about an actress who lost her memory premiered at the Hamptons International Film Festival, won first place Athens Film Festival, Ohio; and presented as the featured film for the Rubin Museum of Art's Brainwave series in New York. Currently Ms. Ross is in post-production on her film ***Title Shot***, a stark chronicle of professional boxing through the rise and fall of 1990's junior middleweight contender Godfrey Nyakana as it focuses its lens on sides of the sweet science rarely seen and with Andy Cohen on the documentary the ***Village Gate***.

FESTIVALS

Tokyo Lift-Off Festival / Tokyo, JP / 2021
EPOS International Art Film Festival / Tel Aviv, IL / 2021
CENSURADOS FILM FESTIVAL / Lima, PE / 2021
LE FIFA / Montreal, CA / 2021 – Jury Prize winner
M+ Screenings: Cinema, Disrupted / Hong Kong / 2021
FIFDH / Geneva, CH / 2021

PRESS

The Jerusalem Post *'Heroic artists in "Beijing Spring"'* (05.2021)
Radio Free Asia "专访《北京之春》导演：民主墙、星星美展、首曝光的现场镜头" (04.2021)
Spirale Magazine *"Beijing Spring : documentaire d'Andy Cohen et Gaylen Ross"* (03.2021)
Le Culte *"Beijing Spring : la naissance de l'art dans la censure"* (03.2021)
Le Devoir *"« Beijing Spring » : Andy Cohen et Gaylen racontent une Chine sans censure"* (03.2021)
Le Temps *"Le films secret du « Printemps de Pékin »"* (03.2021)
Art Asia Pacific *"Capital thaw: Beijing dissidents on film"* (03.2021)
World Radio Switzerland *"Interview of Andy Cohen"* (03.2020)
Heidi.News *"«Beijing Spring», témoignage inédit d'une expérience démocratique"* (03.2020)
M+ Stories *"The Story of Chi Xiaoning and His Smuggled Camera"* (03.2020)
Utopia3 *"Podcast interview with Andy Cohen"* (07.2020)

MORE INFORMATION

www.acfilmsinc.com

www.beijingspringfilm.com

CREDITS

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CONSTANCE LE MARIÉ

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Authors of Star Group Activities of 1979.

CHI XIAONING

REN SHULIN

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Camera

JULIEN ROBY

ROBERT RICHMAN

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EDDIE MARRITZ

HAGEER

MITCH BLUMMER

GREGORY BRUTUS

Original Music

MATT CLIFFORD
DAMIAN LAZARUS
ZHOU YUNPENG

Sound

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VINCENT ROUFFIAC
XIANG CHEN
PETER MILLER

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