

IF THIS IS THE PRESENT,
WHAT IS OUR FUTURE?

“A COMPELLING
WARNING OF
UNCHECKED
SURVEILLANCE.”

—Sight & Sound

TOTAL TRUST

A FILM BY JIALING ZHANG



FILMTANK in CO-PRODUCTION WITH WITFILM INTERACTIVE MEDIA FOUNDATION ZDF/ARTE NTR ANBARA CUER (ANONYMOUS) RES (ANONYMOUS)
AND J.V. CHI (ANONYMOUS) PROD BY BARBARA TOENNIESHEN BESANG CLAIRE SHEN (ANONYMOUS) PROD JÖRG GOLLASCH
EDITED BY KNUT JÄGER MICHAEL GROTENHOFF SASKIA KRESS JIALING ZHANG CO-PROD BY IRIS LAMMERTSMA CUER (ANONYMOUS) AND MICHELLE GAO



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SYNOPSIS - SHORT

TOTAL TRUST is an eye-opening and deeply disturbing documentary about surveillance technology, abuse of power and censorship. Through the haunting stories of people in China who have been monitored, intimidated and even tortured, the film sparks a global debate about the dangers that Big Data and AI pose to individual freedoms. A bracing portrait of a society for whom privacy is all but extinct and a warning for democratic states employing unprecedented security tactics, TOTAL TRUST sounds an alarm about the increasing use of surveillance tools around the world. If this is the present, what does our future look like?

SYNOPSIS - LONG

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China is currently the most heavily monitored country in the world. Half of all the world's surveillance cameras are installed there, penetrating or manipulating the daily lives of citizens. At the same time, systems such as "social credit scoring" are being tested and deployed.

The film tells the stories of three remarkable women who passionately fight for justice – whether for themselves or for their loved ones. It accompanies these initially inconspicuous women on their way to becoming unconditional defenders of individual freedoms and, in the process, reveals the dangerous consequences of widespread state surveillance.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When Filmtank approached me with the idea of making a documentary about the development of state surveillance around the world, I was thrilled. Given my background, it was obvious to focus on the situation in China. But the idea and the conception of the film were fundamentally shaped by the growing threat to individual freedom posed by surveillance systems all over the world.

Surveillance in its various forms can have very far-reaching, negative effects on democracy. I wanted to make a film that would encourage viewers to ask their policymakers and institutions about the development of surveillance technologies and to advocate for their regulation. The point is to develop an awareness of how to deal with Big Data and AI that is guided by the principles of democracy and justice.

The main goal of this film is to raise awareness about pervasive surveillance. With the rapid technological development and increasing sophistication of artificial intelligence, it is up to us to be vigilant about its impact on our lives. The film shows the mechanisms of data collection and aims to inspire questions about how this data is used and for what purpose: An attempt to tell truthful stories and spark meaningful conversations.

- JIALING ZHANG

PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

Filmtank has a history of producing content that looks at the consequences of digitalization. We have been carefully observing how, on a global scale, the latest technologies are being increasingly used to interfere with the rights and freedoms of individuals everywhere. With 'Total Trust', we wanted to pursue this topic further. Digital surveillance tools have long been used by governments to control their citizens, not only in China but all over the world. This is no longer an "unimaginable future", but a reality.

From the very beginning, this film project has been classified as "high-risk" for Filmtank internally. Getting exclusive access to the topic of surveillance is not easy. Several years after the project began, we have to say today: reality has far exceeded our imagination. We developed this project from the start with a strong international network of courageous people. But as soon as one door opened, another closed. Suddenly, digital surveillance was advancing worldwide in the wake of the pandemic.

We were convinced that this issue would become even more explosive from that moment on. That is why we started all over again – with a new team and in an unusual process. Jialing's vision and narrative approach convinced us from the start. Given her background and familiarity with China, it was quickly clear that we would focus on her home country – China, as a mirror for a development happening all around the world. It is a glimpse of a future that is unimaginable to many, but which is already much more real.

This project would not have been possible without the real heroes of this film: the filmmaker, the protagonists and the entire courageous and dedicated team. They were driven by a strong desire to give a voice to those who have experienced excessive state surveillance. And they want to use this film to shake up people all over the world to remain vigilant.

To protect the safety of both the team and the protagonists in China, we followed strict security rules throughout the production process. For example, we only communicated via encrypted messages. All storage media were encrypted and the team in China always deleted content promptly. Unfortunately, we cannot disclose further details about the production process as we must prioritise the protection of the team members. Many of the great artists who worked on this film will remain "anonymous" for the time being. They are all convinced that this story must be told.

THE PROTAGONISTS

Offering rare insights into the lives of people who are at the sharp end of state surveillance and intimidation, the film tells the stories of three inspirational women, who are transformed by the situations they found themselves in.

Zijuan Chen's husband Weiping Chang, a lawyer, was arrested in 2020. Chang had defended people who petitioned the government after their homes were destroyed in forced demolitions, and people facing workplace discrimination. He was one of a handful of male lawyers openly supportive of the #MeToo movement when it spread to China, providing legal support to survivors of sexual violence.

Chen is relentless in her quest for justice for her husband and his release from prison, in spite of surveillance and harassment by the authorities. The film portrays the family's suffering from their prolonged separation, and how Chen's efforts to fight for her husband's release sees her increasingly alienated from her family and neighbors and subjected to heightened surveillance. The documentary culminates with Chen's journey to see her husband's trial thwarted at a provincial border crossing, where guards hold her and her son hostage in her car for the duration of the trial under the pretext of covid restrictions, with her movements likely tracked through digital surveillance.

Sophia Xueqin Huang is a driven, successful journalist who rose to prominence exposing #MeToo stories in Chinese society. Huang first met Chang after she was sued over a series of articles she wrote about the #MeToo movement in China. Chang offered to defend her in court pro bono. They became friends and when Chang was arrested, she wrote about it. When Chang was imprisoned, Huang offered her support, advice and friendship to Chen, explaining what her husband would face under residential surveillance and the stakes for protesting his detention.

Ultimately, Huang too was arrested, to widespread outrage from global media and free speech advocates. She was due to come to the UK after winning a scholarship to read gender studies at the University of Sussex. She is currently awaiting trial for "inciting subversion of state power".

Wenzu Li is a woman fighting for justice for her husband Quanzhang Wang who was one of more than 300 lawyers and activists arrested in 2015. The film shows Li protesting for her husband's freedom, publicly shaving her head to raise awareness of the situation. After three years of detention and two years of imprisonment, Wang was finally released, and we see the heightened levels of surveillance the family are subjected to.

DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

JIALING ZHANG

How did the idea for TOTAL TRUST come about?

I had felt for a long time that it was urgent and necessary to make a film on this subject. Surveillance is ubiquitous, and it is a means of gaining control. Ultimately, it leads to the restriction of basic freedoms. The Covid pandemic has further exacerbated the situation, with increasing digitization and pervasive collection of personal data. I wanted to ask important questions about how this data is used and what impact this could have on the future of society.

Total Trust is an international co-production between Filmtank, Witfilm and Interactive Media Foundation. How did you come to this collaboration?

The project was initiated by Filmtank. The producers approached me to discuss the possibility of making a film about surveillance systems, the dangers of facial recognition software and social credit systems. I quickly agreed because I felt a strong connection to the subject. Because of my familiarity with the region, we decided to choose China as the setting for the film.

Are you worried about the future we will live in because of ubiquitous mass surveillance?

What used to feel like a disturbing prospect for the future has now become a reality all over the world. Many countries have surveillance systems that are becoming more sophisticated with the help of "artificial intelligence." It is important that we become aware of this fact and that we talk about it.

Do you see mass surveillance as a "global" threat?

Yes. While the film focuses on the stories of people in China, we hope to expand the conversation beyond and further. We have this vision since we started making the film. Surveillance technology has become widespread around the world. Large amounts of data were collected for public health purposes, especially during the pandemic, and facial recognition software has already been introduced in several countries. Technology affects every one of us. It's not a simple west/east, democracy/autocracy binary. While a lot of eyes are on Chinese tech companies, the responsibilities of international tech giants such as Apple, Microsoft, Twitter, Amazon etc are often ignored.

What would you like viewers to take away from having watched TOTAL TRUST?

The film is about humanity. It asks the urgent question, what kind of future societies are we heading to?

On an emotional level, I want people to feel anger and horror. Anger about what governments can do to an individual's life. Horror at how authorities can observe citizens in such detail and use data to control their lives and movements. But above all, I want them to feel hope. Hope because there are brave individuals who want to advocate for a better future and fight for justice.

BIOGRAPHY

JIALING ZHANG / DIRECTOR

Jialing is an Emmy-Award nominated independent Chinese filmmaker based in the U.S. She produced “In the Same Breath” (Sundance Film Festival, 2021; Oscar shortlisted 2021), co-directed, and produced “One Child Nation” (Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner, 2019; Oscar shortlisted 2019) & “Complicit” (Human Rights Watch Film Festival, 2017). Jialing was nominated for two PGA Awards for Outstanding Producer of Documentary and a DGA Award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary. She won a Ridenhour documentary Prize in 2020, a duPont-Columbia Award and a Peabody Award in 2022.

FILMTANK

Filmtank is an international award-winning production company based in Berlin, Hamburg and Stuttgart. The focus is on culturally and socially relevant topics. In addition to films, Filmtank develops interactive narrative formats – digital content such as games, apps and virtual reality installations. Filmtank brings together the old masters and young inventors. This results in internationally award-winning works and new perspectives, including the multiple award-winning VR Experiences “MYRIAD. Where we connect”, “Das Totale Tanz Theater”, “networks/out of CTRL” or “Inside Tumucumaque”.

INTERACTIVE MEDIA FOUNDATION

The Interactive Media Foundation (IMF) is a non-profit organization headquartered in Berlin. IMF combines extensive expertise in concept, storytelling, film, digital and production, experimenting with contemporary formats and forms of expression to bring socially relevant issues in art, technology, health and ecology to audience attention. With cross-media productions such as “Not Just Celsius”, “Your Data Mirror”, “Ninette – Thin is not thin enough”, “Ulm Stories” and many more, the creative studio has already been represented at numerous international festivals including Ars Electronica, Beijing International Film Festival, Cannes XR, CPH:DOX, Open City Doc Festival London, Save Festival Moscow, Raindance, Sunny Side of the Docs, VR Days Europe, VRHAM! and has received international awards.

WITFILM

Witfilm is an award-winning production company based in Amsterdam. The company focuses on creative, social and youth documentary films, as well as arthouse fiction films. Headed by director and creative producer Boudewijn Koole and producer Iris Lammertsma, its strength lies in content development and combining personal stories with socially relevant and current topics. Witfilm productions are intense, innovative and intimate. They challenge the way we view the world by showing us multiple perspectives.

Year of Production: **2023**
Running Time: **97 minutes**
Language: **Mandarin with English subtitles**

FilmTank in co-production with: **Witfilm, Interactive Media Foundation, ZDF/arte, NTR**

Director: **Jialing Zhang**
Producer: **Knut Jäger, Michael Grotenhoff, Saskia Kress, Jialing Zhang**
Director of Photography: **Cuier (Anonymous), RCS (Anonymous), J.V. Chi (Anonymous)**
Edited by: **Barbara Toennieshen BfS, Claire Shen (Anonymous)**
Music: **Jörg Gollasch**
Co-Producer China: **Cuier (Anonymous), Michelle Gao**
Co-Producer Witfilm: **Iris Lammertsma**
Executive Producer Filmtank: **Michael Grotenhoff, Saskia Kress, Thomas Tielsch**

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Distributor Germany: **Piffli Medien**
Distributor Taiwan: **Joint Entertainment International Inc.**

Film Website: **total-trust.org**

ABOUT FILM MOVEMENT

Founded in 2002, Film Movement is a North American distributor of award-winning independent and foreign films based in New York City. It has released more than 300 feature films culled from prestigious film festivals worldwide. Film Movement's theatrical releases include American independent films, documentaries, and foreign-language art house titles. Its catalog includes works by directors such as Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Lee Isaac Chung, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Maren Ade, Jessica Hausner, Andrei Konchalovsky, Andrzej Wajda, Ciro Guerra, Jan Komasa and Melanie Laurent. In 2015, Film Movement launched its reissue label Film Movement Classics, featuring new restorations released theatrically as well as on Blu-ray and DVD, including films by such noted directors as Ang Lee, Chen Kaige, Luchino Visconti, Stanley Kwan, Peter Greenaway, Bille August, Marleen Gorris, Takeshi Kitano, Arturo Ripstein, King Hu and Sergio Corbucci.

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