

# An Open Talk on Censorship in China

## A Conversation with Jeffrey Wasserstrom

SEASON 3  
episode one

*audio clip*

Jeffery Wasserstrom

The key thing that would maybe surprise Western readers the most is that, if you write fiction that's set in contemporary China, you have to be very careful not to cross a variety of sort of red lines, and get censored. But, if you write fiction that is through analogy—say, you're setting something in space in the future, and it's possible to read it as a critique of contemporary society, there's a lot more possibility for that than we imagine, or that there has been in a kind of a dystopian view of certain kinds of structures.

Nicholas Lemann

Welcome to Underreported, I'm your host, Nicholas Lemann. Columbia Global Reports produces books that tackle big issues in short format. Since 2015, we've been creating depth and clarity on global issues that are underreported. We work with authors who help us interpret world events through a fresh framework of knowledge. I like to say that we don't just publish books, we use books to start conversations about topics that weren't getting the attention they deserved, until we took them on. This podcast is your audio connection to those important topics.

Today, we focus on an upcoming book called *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*. Our three-part series on this book will explore not only the content of the book, but why it is worth our time and attention. In it, journalist and critic Megan Walsh takes the reader on a journey that proves that works of fiction from Chinese writers are varied, illuminating, and important for Western readers. She uses a combination of investigative curiosity and critical acuity to gather what she calls a whole new taxonomy of Chinese literature. The book dispels assumptions Westerners make about censorship, it clarifies the role of literature in Chinese society, and it opens up a view of Chinese society that simply cannot be gotten through conventional news coverage.

Before we speak to the author herself in upcoming episodes, we want to set the stage. Jeffrey Wasserstrom is one of America's leading China specialists, and has published several important books, including *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*, which Columbia Global Reports published in 2020. That book helped us understand the significance of the China-Hong Kong relationship. There's no better guest to help us wade into

the intricate and nuanced realities of China, a country that the US has locked in its gaze. Welcome, Jeff.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

It's great to be on.

Nicholas Lemann

I want to talk mostly in this session about censorship in general, and in China in particular, as a way of kind of setting up a view that is in Megan Walsh's book that will be counterintuitive to a lot of our listeners. But let's just start, before we get to China, what is censorship anyway? How do you define it, where does it exist, and so on.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

One of the ways to think about this is in virtually any setting there's some degree of censorship. There are some things that there are efforts to block being said, or at least being published, or being shown. And that these can take on different things. I mean, we can get into the fact that—so the question isn't "is there censorship?" but "how extensive, or limited is censorship in different kinds of settings?" So, we can think about West Germany—well, Germany—as being a place with quite a bit of freedom of expression, but there is censorship of Nazi content, which is seen as something that is so dangerous, and outside acceptability within the body politic that the body politic needs to be kept safe from it. And I think the logic of censorship when it's done by a government is often the logic of trying to protect people from things that are bad for them. As well as in some settings, things that the state views are bad for the state. But, if we think about it as this kind of regime of trying to protect people, I think that helps us think about varieties of censorship, as opposed to a kind of, the switch is on or the switch is off.

Nicholas Lemann

What do you see here in the US? You know, many people think it couldn't happen here, we have no censorship. Is there censorship here?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Well, there are certainly certain kinds of things that certain groups of people, for example, are not allowed to consume. There are forms of pornography that's banned, or particularly that's banned from younger people. And I mean, one of the things

about authoritarian states, I think, is that they tend to treat all of the populace the way that in some other settings children are treated. So there's a kind of infantilizing that goes on with some kinds of censorship systems that, rather than say there are certain segments of the population that can't be trusted with certain texts, there's a broader thing that says that nobody can be trusted with them.

Nicholas Lemann

So now let's move to China. Obviously, there is censorship in China. How do you understand the guiding principles of censorship in China? Is everything censored? What's it like there, as far as censorship goes?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I mean, I'll pick up on what I started to say. I actually kind of misspoke when I said that in an authoritarian state there's an idea that all sorts of texts are just too dangerous for everybody. Because the elites, the top elite in many authoritarian states, make exceptions for themselves. So you have all kinds of examples of—for example, communist party-run states that viewed Hollywood films as decadent, and bad for the populace, but yet the elite would watch them themselves behind closed doors. So, you often have that kind of bracketing off.

So if we think about different segments of society in China, one consistency under communist party rule has been that there's been tighter control of the forms of media that affect the largest amount of the population. So there's more rigidity shown in what can be shown on television, or what can be shown in film than what can be published in books.

Also, there's more flexibility, or more leeway, in what can be published in very literary kinds of texts. And sometimes there's actually, I've seen in my own trips to China, there'll be something that's available in English in a bookstore that could not be available translated into Chinese on the mainland. Because there's the idea that the people who would actually read it in English is a smaller segment of the population, so there doesn't need to be that much of a control.

I think something else about censorship, there's a wonderful book by Margaret Roberts, a more scholarly book, *Censored*, about China, where she talks about the need to think about not just things that can't be published, but also what she talks about as “flooding.” The way that the airways are filled with messages that the state wants you to see.

[audio clip in Mandarin]

So that's one of the things that when it comes to politics, particularly about Chinese politics, there's a lot of control of the flow of information by things that are blocked, and things that are flooding.

But I think it's important to know that within China most people, most of the time, when they're looking for something to read, when they're spending time picking up a book, they're not necessarily looking for political information that will or won't be censored.

So actually, and this is why I think *The Subplot* is so interesting, and so valuable, it focuses on what a lot of people are reading a lot of the time, which is a wide spectrum of kinds of materials that the state doesn't necessarily feel are dangerous to people to read, often because they're not specifically about China.

The censorship that takes place is largely of things that specifically relate to the country itself, and particularly to the leaders of the country itself. And then there's a lot of censorship. But there are a lot of topics that one can discuss and read about, and so, often I think the idea is that this is a place where there's very little options, but actually there are a lot of options. But there are also just very clear no-go zones.

Nicholas Lemann

I want to take a little short detour into your book, *Vigil*. So, you tell the story of Hong Kong. When Hong Kong was handed over from British control to Chinese control—this is a story you tell and know very well—there was a feeling that the rules are going to be different in Hong Kong from the mainland.

*audio clip*

[archived recording]

Hello again from Hong Kong, on the night the colony is about to be handed back to China. At last, the moment has arrived. After 156 years of British rule, China takes over the vibrant and enormously successful island of Hong Kong, and the new territory.

Nicholas Lemann

So, with respect to censorship, was that true then? And is that true now?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

It was definitely true early on, after 1997. I was surprised, I mean happily surprised, when I would go to Hong Kong and I would be particularly looking for—so what's something I'm seeing that I couldn't see on the mainland? Is it still really different?

And to just give you examples, when there was a leadership transition in 2002, I happened to spend some time on the mainland and some time in Hong Kong. On the mainland, every news coverage of that leadership transition just made it seem like a smooth, good transition. There were no political cartoons mocking it, or questioning it, there were no op-eds questioning it. But in Hong Kong, one of the first things I saw was a political cartoon that showed the leader who was stepping down pulling the strings from behind the scenes, and having the new leader be a puppet. So it was sort of mocking the whole structure of it.

You could see this really dramatic—there was some fear, of course, that there was some self-censorship, and people were not as completely free as before. But when it came to forms of political communication, it was really a very dramatic difference between the two places.

One of my favorite examples is that there was even a television show headliner, which before 1997—I mean it's easy to think of it as a kind of Saturday Night Live equivalent. And before 1997 it mocked the colonial authorities in Hong Kong. After 1997, it kept up the same style, but began mocking the communist party leaders in Beijing.

*[audio clip in Cantonese]*

That was a program that continued quite a while, but during the last couple of years, what's been really, really striking, dispiriting, and saddening, has been that this kind of night and day difference has become a very subtle kind of difference. That show headliner was pulled off the airways in 2020, the kinds of newspapers that were most likely to run those kinds of political cartoons, some of them were shut down. And you just started to have a move toward much more of the controlled media environment that you have on the mainland.

With *Vigil* itself, it was for sale in English in Hong Kong in 2020, in bookstores soon after it came out. One thing that I mentioned before, is that there's more latitude given to works in English that a smaller amount of the population is likely to read. What we saw in Hong Kong around the time *Vigil* came out is at least with books like it that were available in Chinese, sometimes the Chinese language edition would

be disappearing from libraries and from bookstores, but the English language edition would still be sold for a while. But I think with the continuing tightening we'll soon see a setting where even the English language edition can't be available in the way that the English edition of Vigil's not allowed to ever be sold on the mainland.

Nicholas Lemann

Please pitch this to the uninitiated about China. China's a huge country. If there were a sort of typical urban Chinese citizen with some education, what would that person—like a picture of that person's life sort of ingesting material. Are there bookstores? Can that person walk into a bookstore? What would be for sale in the bookstore? Is there an Amazon where you can order books? What do you see on TV? Are there newsstands? What's for sale? Just kind of create my media environment for me as a typical middle class urban Chinese.

Jeffery Wasserstrom

Yeah, it's a great question. And I will bracket off this sort of—when we talk about typical, clearly urban is different from rural. Another thing, when I presented Hong Kong as being much freer than other parts of China, there are places that are much less free. Tibet and Xinjiang will have much more controlled kinds of things, and books have been disappearing from bookshelves there that would be available elsewhere.

But let's just imagine walking into a bookstore in Shanghai or in Nanjing or Beijing. There are amazing bookstores in terms of just sort of varieties of things that you can buy. And some of the things that would be probably surprising, and radically different than the United States in a positive sense is there's much more translated literature. So, there are plenty of books by Chinese authors, but there are really quite extraordinary selections of translations of Western fiction, but fiction from many different languages. So, fiction in eastern European languages, and novelists from Africa.

I mean, in some ways, though we can go into a kind of feeling superior to people who are living in a censored society with certain things, definitely more things blocked, there's another way in which at least the kind of intellectually curious Chinese reader has an amazing number of choices when it comes to that. And there are lots of popular genres there, and this is something that *The Subplot* goes through very well. So it's an interesting—it can be in a way a very kind of cosmopolitan thing. Even at this moment, when it's harder to physically have people move across the border, there is plenty of translated literature. So that's one thing.

The newsstands, there are quite a lot of newspapers and magazines. The story with newspapers is a sad one to me, because there was a while about 20 years ago when it seemed that the newspapers had gone from all being pretty uniform in the way they covered political issues to being much more varied. But now we've had a slide back under Xi Jinping toward much more of a tendency for his image and his words to dominate the newspapers, and dominate the news broadcasts.

*[audio clip in Mandarin]*

So we've had a kind of reversion to an earlier period of more of a kind of monotone when it comes to news. But when it comes to entertainment, you still have this wide amount of variegation.

Nicholas Lemann

2003, I was appointed dean of Columbia Journalism School, and the very first meeting I had, I was with a now gone gentleman named Seymour Topping, former managing editor of The New York Times, to pitch me on creating a formal partnership with Tsinghua University Journalism School, then starting. And the pitch was, it's just about to change. Everything's about to open up, you've got to be in on it. You know? And that seems pretty antiquated now.

Jeffery Wasserstrom

It was an incredible moment, and I'm glad you shared that story, because you know, Seymour Topping had had this long relationship with China. I know what he meant, you know? There was this feeling when I went into—I went into a Nanjing bookstore probably about that time, and I was just blown away by it. It was called Librairie Avant-Garde, and it had this sort of French thing. There were pictures on the wall of Walter Benjamin, and James Joyce, and Virginia Wolfe.

They're notable because in Mao's day, a figure like Virginia Wolfe or James Joyce would be banned because they were seen as decadent capitalist writers. And you really had this feeling about them that in kind of cultural terms, there was this sense of kind of anything goes, as long as it's not specifically about China, and there was a real palpable excitement.

And some of that is still lingering, is still there, but the news media has gone back toward a much more like Mao's era time, and also there's just a bombarding of the

airwaves with nationalistic military films that sort of have a drumbeat of patriotism.

*[audio clip in Mandarin]*

While at the same time, there is still openness to a lot of different kinds of popular culture from around the world, although now sometimes they'll be banning of popular culture products because the creator of them is said to have somehow offended quote-unquote "the sensibilities of the Chinese people." By which it means, the sensibilities of the Chinese Communist Party.

Nicholas Lemann

No Mia Farrow movies. But, let's take the same question, particularly since China's so locked down right now. So I'm the same hypothetical typical Chinese urbanite, but I'm at home, and I'm sitting in front of the internet. What do I have access to? We in the US have this image of the Great Firewall. What can I see and not see as a Chinese person going online?

Jeffery Wasserstrom

I mean the Great Firewall is important. It's incredibly important when it comes to warping some senses of political issues. A journalist I thought did wonderful coverage of China, and still writes about it some but from the US, Christina Larson, had a piece come out five or six years ago I think saying that we should think of the Chinese internet as being both one of the best and one off the worst internets in the world. Maybe the best in some ways, and the worst in some ways.

What she meant was, I think, that if you're talking about using the internet to figure out how to spend your leisure time in entertainment, it can really put, say, the American internet to shame. And just to give you an example, we have Yelp where you can look up how a restaurant is rated. But with so many more people feeding information onto these kinds of sites in China, you can find out what the best dish that week is at that particular restaurant. You can figure out which waiter or waitress is in a particularly bad mood that week, so you want to avoid being in their section.

So, you can have this kind of granular ability to enjoy yourself. And in some ways, online things have been ahead of things in the West at certain points with things like paying electronically for things. Ride services at certain points were more efficient. So to think of it as both being particularly good when it comes to some areas of life, and particularly bad with others.

And there is a kind of hard block on certain taboo subjects, and a way in which you can only get the government's view of—so events in Hong Kong, you can only get a view of them as terrible riots that were put down by police who showed a great deal of restraint. Who, rather than being able to read, say, in the United States, since early in 2022, you could read radically different interpretations of what had happened in the United States on January 6th of 2021. In China, with an event like that, one of the things is you could only get one version of it. And the censorship mechanisms will work overtime in scrubbing the internet clean of things that they don't want you to see.

There has been an important Me Too issue involving high-level members of the Chinese elite, and tennis player Peng Shuai, and that was just scrubbed out so quickly that it came close to us not even being able to know about it. But, internet users in China can be—can know this is coming and work very hard to capture with screenshots and other things they think that may disappear. So there is a kind of cat and mouse game going on on the internet.

But, one other thing I'll just say is, in China, as in other part of the world, one of the biggest variables is something we haven't mentioned, which is with reading, with using the internet and all of this, you'll have a quite dramatic difference across generations. And when it comes to many things, including what people are reading for fun or listening to, you might actually find that Chinese in their 20s on the mainland have more in common with South Korean youth in their 20s or American youth in their 20s than any of those groups will have in common with people in their, say, 60s or 70s.

Nicholas Lemann

I want to ask you one last question. You spoke a couple times about the difference between news and entertainment. You know, Megan Walsh's book, she's mostly writing about fiction, and fiction can mean a whole lot of things, from serious literary fiction to comics. Does fiction as a category mean the same thing as entertainment, and therefore can it sort of fly under the radar?

Jeffery Wasserstrom

That's a great question. I think fiction—there is more latitude with fiction than with non-fiction. But I think actually the key thing that would maybe surprise Western readers the most is that if you write fiction that's set in contemporary China, you have to be very careful not to cross a variety of sort of red lines and get censored.

But if you write fiction that is through analogy, say you're setting something in space in the future, and it's possible to read it as a critique of contemporary society, there's a lot more possibility for that than we imagine or that there has been in a kind of dystopian view of certain kinds of structures. And science-fiction is a really exciting genre right now in China.

But I like to use the example that the book 1984, which is widely seen as a critique of systems like the Chinese—like communist party rule in any place, and was a thoroughly banned book in the Soviet Union up until the very last, until Gorbachev's era, and fairly late in it.

*audio clip*

[archived clip]

voiceover:

In 1949, George Orwell had a vision of the future. Today, that vision is still a best-selling novel, and his prophecy remains as terrifying as ever.

“Do you want a vision of the future, Winston? Imagine a book stamping on a human face forever.”

You can buy a translation of Orwell's 1984 in virtually any Chinese bookstore. At least you could still do that when I was there last in the last 2010s. And the idea was that it wasn't about China. It doesn't mention China. And so it's something you can think—so in other words, it's not—there isn't a banning of all the things that could be allowing you to think creatively in this way.

And there are Chinese writers who use the kind of gray zones, the places that they're not talking about China, but you can imagine them talking about China. Or they're talking about China's past, but you can read it as actually in part about China's present. And that's I think a lot of the space for creativity for fiction, and that's dealt with in the book.

Nicholas Lemann

Well thanks, Jeff. That's where we have to end for today, but that perfectly sets us up for the next session, and we'll see how Megan Walsh shows us how Chinese writing writing is not as censored as many Americans might assume it is, for many of the reasons you just gave. Things that find ways up, down, over, and around the censorship standards in China, and create a really interesting picture of what life is really like there that most Americans don't have, and most Americans don't think Chinese people have access to. But we'll hear more about that next time. Thanks, Jeff,

for being with us.

Jeffery Wasserstrom

Thanks so much, I've really enjoyed the conversation.

Nicholas Lemann

This has been part one of our podcast series on *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*. Next time, we'll talk to the author herself. Megan Walsh reached past the censorship in China we spoke about today. In her new book, she compiled a treasure trove of Chinese writing previously confined to Chinese readers. She found a variety of voices from a nation that we in the West tend to think of as a monolith. Next time, the author gets to the truth, and she gets it in writing.

Our producer is Tracey Madigan. Associate producer Liann Herder. Audio engineer John Wepler.

I want to thank the Mellon Foundation and its support for this podcast.

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I'm Nick Lemann, thanks for listening.