

The Stories Chinese Fiction Reveals

A Conversation with Megan Walsh

SEASON 3
episode three

audio clip

Megan Walsh

The one thing that Chinese fiction, in the past, and even now, proves, is that Chinese writers have been hamstrung and many have probably stopped writing because of censorship and a very restrictive cultural climate. But they've also written some incredibly innovative works, which really are just some of the best things I've ever read.

Nicholas Lemann

Welcome to Underreported, I'm your host, Nicholas Lemann. This is the last of our three-part series on the book called *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*. We're exploring the content of the book and why it's worth our time and attention.

Journalist and critic Megan Walsh takes her readers on a journey through the works of Chinese fiction. Works that are otherwise difficult for the rest of the world to access. Her investigative curiosity is what made this book happen. Today, she joins us to share what she found out, and how she knew there was a bigger story to tell about fiction writing in China. Welcome back, Megan.

Megan Walsh

Thanks for having me.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's start just by talking about, first of all, how you got interested in China in the first place. You're British, not Chinese yourself.

Megan Walsh

I actually lived in Beijing back in 2004 for the first time, and it was—I think I was 22, 23, and it was just an incredibly exciting time to be there. The cultural scene was very different in London. It felt sort of fresh, and like it was on the up.

I was hanging out in little bookshops and cafes selling knockoff DVDs of arthouse

films, both foreign and Chinese. And I spent lots of time tagging along with my flatmate to artist studios that hosted all sorts of cultural events and live music nights and painting and things.

So, when I moved back it just sort of never really left me. I was working at various newspapers, including the Times book section—my major is in literature—but I was given various opportunities to write about Chinese fiction, and the arts, and film while I was there.

And there was one trip where I got to go back to various cities in China to write about various fiction writers. And that was kind of it for me. I was so happy to be back and so inspired by all the different people I was speaking to that I actually moved back to Beijing the following year.

And that's where this journey really properly began. I learnt Chinese in earnest from that point, and started reading and watching a lot of Chinese fiction and film. Yeah, that was the sort of beginning of this journey for me.

Nicholas Lemann

When was the last time you were in China?

Megan Walsh

I actually managed to go just before the pandemic started. So I feel very lucky that I managed to sneak in before everything was shut. It was towards the end of 2019. It was only for a short time, unfortunately, and it was mainly to research for this book. So I spent a lot of time just trawling the book shops and going to various little—well from tiny little bookshops up in mountains and mega book cities in Shenzhen, to try and collect as much material as I could to start research for this project.

Nicholas Lemann

If you could talk a little bit just about bookstore culture in China. When you go to a bookstore—here in the US, and maybe less so in the UK, Amazon's killing the bookstores. So there's way less bookstore culture than there was 25 years ago. It sounds from reading you, that it's a much more vibrant scene in China.

Megan Walsh

I think it's a real mix, actually. I think that the main thing that's probably killing off books is that books haven't really had a great print run for quite a long time in China.

Most people read things online. In the past, there was a lot of copyright infringement and people just sort of reading things where they could get them.

Now there is a much greater interest in reading culture again. And also, dare I say, the aesthetics of reading. I think the bookshops have become—books have become a real symbol of contemporary Chinese urban society. They're extremely beautiful. A lot of the time the books aren't even real, they're just part of a kind of art installation of books.

But on the other side, especially in certain places, I would say going into a bookshop is one of the most inspiring things. Much more so than in London, where I live. Especially in a place like Shenzhen, which is a young, vibrant city, lots of migrants have moved there. Everywhere you go—the world's biggest bookstore is there, one of the world's tiniest it seems is there. There are just young people crammed into the aisles reading whatever they can get their hands on. And these places are often open 24 hours a day, and they're there pretty much the whole time.

And I found that really genuinely an inspiring experience. But I don't think it necessarily translates into there being a kind of lucrative pathway for writers

Nicholas Lemann

The word "fiction" sort of triggers, at least in my mind, a picture of a sort of literary establishment of esteemed critics. Kind of like the French academy or something like that. Does that—is there an equivalent of that in China?

Megan Walsh

Yes, there's an organization which I think was put in place pretty early on in the Mao years, which is the Chinese Writers Association. And it's something which people tend to—the membership of the association, which is pegged to different provinces, is one of the first things people mention in their biography if they're a writer. It just gives them a degree of access to certain publications, magazines. And also makes it more likely that they might be published. And I think in the past it was very much set up as a way of making sure that people were kept in line, in terms of what they were writing.

There was a really good piece by somebody called Eric Brahmansen in The New York Times who sort of calls it more of a kind of old boys network now, in which it's more important to focus on the writer than the writing. So it's just about kind of being sociable, and getting on with the right people, and networking, rather than being an arbiter of great fiction, or even politically correct fiction.

Nicholas Lemann

Of course there's an element of that here in the US as well, and even in the UK, probably. But what's striking about your book is you kind of start there, and there's this little world of official Chinese literary culture, and then there's a huge, much much bigger mega-world of unofficial Chinese literary culture. How did you figure out that that was out there, and how did you explore it?

Megan Walsh

The first way is I read a lot of books that were banned, that couldn't be published. So I guess they were some of the first novels that I read both in Chinese and by Chinese writers. And so automatically they are not official publications, they are speaking against whatever is deemed part of the status quo.

But then, also, the internet has completely transformed the landscape everywhere. And because of China's very turbulent history, publishing has had a very stop-start time of it, and hasn't really had a very kind of organic chance to find its feet.

So I think the arrival of the internet at this particular point in Chinese history, of economic uplift and money to spare, people have just completely defaulted to the internet to write everything, and have not even thought about going through official channels anymore. It's just not worth the hassle.

So there's a huge amount that's being written. Poetry—I've mentioned before the kind of online fantasy. There's an estimated 400,000,000 titles, I think, at the moment, out there on various platforms. 24,000,000 writers. And so it's not that they're difficult to find, it's sort of, they're hard to escape, really. A lot of them are being turned into tv shows, and are really kind of dictating how Chinese culture is being digested

Nicholas Lemann

Just to be clear, you know, we were talking a moment ago about works that have been censored and that you read them. Then you know, in your book, there's an enormous amount of material about, to use the American terminology, things like genre fiction, science fiction, fantasy, comics, YA or teen fiction, fable. All that kind of stuff. Is that stuff getting censored, or getting past censored? Or is it regarded by the censors as just not worth their attention?

Megan Walsh

I think until the last year or so it's not really been censored, there's been a lot of

leeway for these things. Especially the fantasy novels, I think, have been seen as sort of harmless fun.

But, I think in the last year or so, there's been—perhaps even longer, actually—much more of a crackdown, primarily because they've become so popular. So things which are—if there's any sex included, if there's too much violence, scenes of suicide are now not allowed to be included. There's been a pressure for all of these platforms to get writers to self-censor in the first place.

I think in recent years—sorry, in recent months—there's even been pressure to actively write socialist stories again, which has been a huge shift from what it was before. And we'll have to see what kind of superhero narratives are pasted upon, you know, those Red Hero stories.

But I think on the other hand, there was, for example, one of the areas I was most interested in was this sort of blossoming of migrant worker poetry, which is all online really. And because it wasn't critical of the government, or even China itself, but it was sort of sublimating a feeling of feeling let down and not able to benefit from China's sort of economic miracle. It occupied a very interesting space in Chinese culture where it was sort of holding to account this, I guess, narrative of success without being taken down or critiqued in any way.

Nicholas Lemann

Do you read English-language equivalents of some of the stuff you wrote about in China? The science fiction, fantasy—all those kinds of things? You may not, but the reason I'm asking is, are there distinctive Chinese characterological features of this material that show national concerns, national obsessions, that you wouldn't find in the West? Or, conversely, would you say everybody wants—everybody's interested in sex, everybody's interested in money?

Megan Walsh

I couldn't answer too authoritatively. I guess the one area that seems to have attracted most comparisons between China and Western and/or Japanese and Korean narratives are that there's no xianxia, which are kind of fantasies set in mystical Chinese worlds, which are very much like our superhero narratives, but they tend to focus on an individual hothead who just gets more and more and more powerful, and that is the main objective of the story. It's sort of extreme individualism, I guess.

Whereas I think, in the West and even in Korean and Japanese versions of the same

thing, there tends to be a degree of teamwork. That they are fighting—it's goodies against baddies. And people tend to sort of be quite amazed at how—this often a word that's used—shameless the protagonists are in these Chinese fantasies.

And one thing I would caution is not to make any conclusions about that in terms of how these young Chinese writers feel about themselves. I think it often, in my opinion, it kind of implies the opposite. That there are sort of delusions of grandeur that they don't in any way feel in real life.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's say you're a Chinese writer who is over on the edge of more kind of conventional literary aspiration. Are there way you can do your writing to escape censorship? Are there things you can do that get your work out to the public and past the various walls that you might have to find yourself blocked by?

Megan Walsh

Do you mean in terms of younger writers who might have sort of politically thorny ideas?

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, it could be younger or could be older. But, for example, are there ways to write about the distant past such that your audience will know that you're saying things about the present, but it's not so obvious? That kind of thing.

Megan Walsh

Yeah, so I think there's, some of the greatest fiction I've read in recent years that's come out of China has been exactly that. It's been people like Yan Lianke, and Yu Hua who write obliquely about the present through the past. But I think they also do it because they are trying to grapple with what happens when that past is rewritten, and there is no, I guess, sort of public access to it.

So, Yan Lianke writes about the Chinese reeducation camps. He writes about towns from the time of 1950s up until right now going through a kind of epic transformation. But each time, they're done in a sort of heavily metaphorical way. And, to my mind, an incredibly innovative and beautiful way of experiencing what they feel like it's like to live in essentially a non-reality. Some of their work gets published, some of it doesn't, but they continue to write and work there.

I think in terms of younger writers who would like to write like that it's much harder, and there's much less tolerance for it, and they tend to really suffer from not having the authority or courage to write in metaphorical or overly stylized ways, and tend to default to realism as a way to get published within official channels.

Nicholas Lemann

Some of what you write about is this world of, I guess it strikes me as mega-commercial. People who work in these kind of writing factory environments, I guess from their house, but where they're producing an astonishing number of words every day. Is any of that stuff any good, and is that a real commercial business?

Megan Walsh

I haven't come across any that's any good yet. But, I haven't read a huge amount of it, primarily because each of them can be up to 6,000,000 words long, and each time it hasn't really felt worth my time.

That's not to say though, given the amount that is being produced, there isn't incredible stuff being written. I have just not been in a position to actually find it. I have huge hope for it, and I do think that's where all of the most interesting and innovative fiction in China will come from. I just don't know if it'll come through the platforms that have been hosting those kinds of works, which tend to, because it's a business model, promote length, and quantity over quality in the hope that some producer and tv station will adapt it for a tv show. It's all about the IP, basically.

Nicholas Lemann

When you're in China, when you were last in China in 2019, in general, in addition to just going into book stores and reading things, have you met interesting people on the way to writing this book, and who are they?

Megan Walsh

Yeah, so I have mainly met people actually outside of China, and there was one obvious reason for that is that I didn't want to put anybody in a difficult position. Because the book is about fiction, I wanted to write about those works, and those writers, through the medium they've chosen to express themselves.

However, that's not to say I didn't get some help and recommendations from various people. One of them was a wonderful guy called Ou Ning who's an artist and set up a wonderful literary magazine, which has sadly now folded for various reasons. And

he was one of the people who also tried to set up these communes in the countryside where people can discuss ideas and share literary recommendations, and he set up bookshops there for people to come and visit. And he gave me some wonderful introductions to writers.

As did some bookshops that I went to that have their own literary magazines attached to them. I'd like to put a shoutout for One Way Street, which is an incredible bookshop, and also has a fantastic magazine called Dandu, which is a kind of independent reader, which I highly recommend people check out.

Nicholas Lemann

With the caveat that nobody can predict the future, I feel like we're getting a double story from you. One is this incredible flourishing of—I guess you'd just say broadly—expression in China. And the other is the government's increasing interest in shutting it down and moderating, or censoring it. Where do you see this all going over the next few years?

Megan Walsh

Obviously, it's really hard to say, and I would love to say I felt more optimistic. But I also think that the one thing that Chinese fiction in the past, and even now, proves, is that Chinese writers have been hamstrung and many have probably stopped writing because of censorship and a very restrictive cultural climate.

But they've also written some incredibly innovative works, which really are just some of the best things I've ever read. And I think—I remember reading Edmund Wilson say that he thought that the restrained beauty of Chekhov was a result of being inspired by Pushkin who was censored by the Tzar.

And I think we have to just keep an open mind that no matter what kind of restrictions writers are placed under, that some will submit to it, some will be destroyed by it and stop writing, and others will really rise to the challenge and continue to write really exciting stuff. And that's the only way I can predict things, I think.

Nicholas Lemann

Well that's a good thought to leave with, and as optimistic as one can be, and I'll accept your optimism. It's a fascinating book and a really great and original achievement. And I hope many people who read it will feel moved to keep reading works coming out of China, because it illuminates the vast country in ways that we

don't get in conventional news coverage. So thank you Megan for writing the book, thank you for being with us.

Megan Walsh

Thanks.

Nicholas Lemann

Thanks to our audience for being with us on the podcast.

That wraps up our three-part series on Columbia Global Reports' latest release, *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*.

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

A very special thank you to the Mellon Foundation and its support for this podcast.

All our podcasts, and more information about our books can be found at globalreports.columbia.edu

I'm Nick Lemann, thanks for listening.

