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Human Rights in China with Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Asia Dialogues

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Audio

Senior Fellow Devin Stewart speaks to scholar Jeffrey Wasserstrom, of University of California, Irvine, about the current state of Chinese media, politics, leadership, and human rights. They also discuss the country's anti-corruption campaign, Chinese history, and Wasserstrom's new book "Eight Juxtapositions: China Through Imperfect Analogies."

Transcript

DEVIN STEWART: I'm Devin Stewart here at Carnegie Council, and I'm here with Jeff Wasserstrom. He's a professor at University of California, Irvine, and he's also a China scholar.

Jeff, great to have you here.

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: It's great to be back talking to you again.

DEVIN STEWART: How would you characterize this overall situation regarding human rights in China these days?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: I found the last couple of years to be quite worrisome in this way. One way I think about it is that after the crackdown in 1989, the [June 4th massacre](#), there was a real tightening. There was an idea that there was a real clampdown on what had been expanding zones of freedom and possibility. But then, from the mid-1990s on for about a decade, it seemed that from year to year the zones were rebounding a bit, very slowly. It was sort of two steps forward, one step back.

The last few years it has felt more like two steps backward to every one step forward, and that is very worrisome. And there have been some worrisome developments even in just the last year that have given an increased sense of concern about this.

DEVIN STEWART: So it's essentially since the start of [Xi Jinping's](#) regime? What has sparked it?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: I think Xi Jinping's ascension has seen an increase in this kind of worrisome trend. But I think the trend began before that, in the lead-up to the [Olympics](#). There was a sense that there needed to be special control while this special event was going to take place. That had happened before, but there was a sense that after a period of tightened concern that then there would be a loosening up. We've been watching, and there hasn't been the same kind of relaxing of that.

After the 2008 special event, there were other special events. In 2009 there was a big parade marking the [60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China](#) (PRC). During that period, there needed to be special watchfulness. Then in 2010 there was the [Expo](#).

With Xi Jinping there was an increase of that. But it also has something to do with perhaps the Chinese government's increasing heft in the world and feeling that it doesn't need to be as sensitive about international pressure on these kinds of issues.

DEVIN STEWART: Is it working out for them? Are you worried that there might be some backlash or negative consequences?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: I think it's always hard to tell with things like this move for greater control.

And it's hard to tell with Xi Jinping. There is debate among China specialists. Is this because he is feeling so strong and confident? Is it because he is feeling so worried that the economy is slowing and that there could be renewed discontent? There is discontent in China. There is no question about that. There are still protests that go on—many protests. Every day somewhere in China there are some people doing things.

So it's still hard to tell if it's cockiness that you can get away with some of this, or anxiety so you do more of this. I think it's probably some of both, and those two things can be happening simultaneously.

DEVIN STEWART: But cockiness and anxiety together sounds like a dangerous combination. How would you see that playing out?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: It is. It's a worrisome combination, and I think it's a strange situation.

But I think the other thing to keep in mind is that different parts of China have operated very differently for the last decade and more. When we talk about what's going on, we need to separate out the kinds of controls on freedom of speech, the kinds of human rights abuses in places like [Xinjiang](#) and [Tibet](#), which are places that are always a special concern for the center because there are ideas that there is so much discontent that could boil up. Then there's a different set of rules or patterns in most of the mainland other than those areas. Then there's Hong Kong, where there's greater freedom in all kinds of ways.

But the worrisome things in the last little while have been some of the patterns of control in places like Xinjiang and Tibet seem to be seeping into other parts of the mainland and some of the patterns of control on the mainland seem to be slipping over into Hong Kong. So it's a kind of messing with what seemed to be hard-to-figure-out lines but lines you could figure out. A lot of people are on edge, of the people who are eager to speak out in differing ways.

It's not just true geographically but also topically. It used to be that certain kinds of feminist activism, if it did not directly challenge the main parts of the state system, were allowed to take place. There were things that, when you were going to try to even use some sort of forms of performance theater on the streets to try to draw attention to sexual harassment or something like that, the government might not be pleased about it but you could go ahead and do that.

Then a year ago, in March of last year, there were five feminists who [got in trouble](#) for doing things that weren't that different from what they had done just a year or two before—that kind of unsettled assumptions about where the lines were that you needed to be careful not to cross.

DEVIN STEWART: As you know, Xi Jinping has recently [asked for a pledge of loyalty](#), in essence, from the media in China, asking for loyalty and the love of the [Chinese Communist Party](#). I don't think

I've ever encountered a leader asking for love from the media. That's maybe a bit comical. But it seems like the media is going along with it so far, as far as I can gather.

The Washington Post had a very interesting [editorial](#) saying that the direction of China these days, including this move to muzzle the press, casts doubt on an old liberal idea. That liberal idea was when economies mingle, when people trade ideas across oceans and trade with one another, people get richer and human rights flourish, societies get more open, and you bring the level up of the shared humanity in a sense. As you know, that was the working hypothesis for American foreign policymakers toward China for many years.

Given that the direction of China seems to be going in the opposite direction now—and yet the economy is still getting bigger and we are still trading with them quite a bit, the trade is not going away, and the financial interactions are blossoming—what are we to make of this old liberal idea that free trade and free economic and commercial exchange helps human rights? Is this idea dead? *The Washington Post* is saying we should rethink it. How would you come down on that idea?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: I think it has always been problematic to think of it as too direct a relationship, and I think there has been a problem with thinking of that.

I think Singapore has been an example that we should have been paying attention to for quite a while. For all the talk of the China model now, which is about a booming economy that is moving more toward higher tech, and yet essentially a one-party state that has real limits on civil liberties and control—and, admittedly in Singapore there have been some moves very slowly toward more liberalization, but the kind of narrative that saw a direct line moving along. I think Singapore has always raised issues about it, even though Taiwan has been a great example of seeming to conform actually to that kind of liberal notion, because Taiwan definitely began to democratize when the economy was improving. And we have South Korea as well.

So some people say Asia is a great example other than China where you saw that happening but in other cases you didn't see it happening.

DEVIN STEWART: Regarding Hong Kong, wasn't the hope in recent years that when Hong Kong [came back](#) to China's rule that China's mainland would sort of move a little more toward the openness of Hong Kong? And yet we're seeing the opposite taking place.

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: Yes. I think initially probably the more realistic expectation would have been that there would have been a flow of influence in both directions, that some aspects of Hong Kong would be mainland-ized and some parts of the mainland would be Hong Kong-ized.

There was a little bit of that at first. The media just over the border from Hong Kong in southern China was more experimental, in part because it was playing to an audience that had access to television and radio that was coming over the border. So there seemed to be at least a kind of mixed feeling. Now, most recently, there has been this move in the other direction, where the flow really does seem to be from the mainland into Hong Kong.

I have thought about Hong Kong in some ways being a space, using the unusual analogies that I like, as being a bit like West Berlin was during the [Cold War](#): a small place, kind of isolated, surrounded by this big communist land. Of course, when the Berlin Wall [fell](#), the mores and the styles of life of West Berlin became much more of the norm in East Berlin and what had been East Germany, this much larger area, near there. The hope was, I guess, with Hong Kong becoming part of the mainland, it would be maybe in some way infecting, that people would want the lifestyles of

what was just over the border.

But what we've seen is something where there was this parallel between Hong Kong and West Berlin then, now it's as though when there had been unification people living in West Berlin suddenly had to adjust to patterns much more like East Berlin, which would have been very, very troubling to people there.

DEVIN STEWART: Going back to Xi Jinping's relationship with the media, why is he asking for love? Can you explain that to us?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: Going back, when Xi Jinping took power, I think there was a debate that was off-kilter in some of the media, which was would he be a reformer who would restart the kind of processes that had stalled toward political reform, or would we just get more of the same as what we'd had under [Hu Jintao](#)?

What people weren't expecting was that we would actually see a restarting of something different, which is more of something much more like a personality cult and much more of a personalistic stamp on things, whereas [Jiang Zemin](#) and Hu Jintao, the two previous leaders, had clearly been the first among equals in a kind of collective leadership. One side of this was their writings were not published and promoted until after they stepped down.

Xi Jinping—we're seeing his writings being promoted. There was a just a new book of them. He has had a couple of books of things out. Now *Xi Jinping: Wit and Wisdom* has just come out, showing up in different places.

This is a throwback, it seems, in part to [Mao](#). It is also, in a way, a throwback even further than that, to [Chiang Kai-shek](#), who was also a personalistic leader of a [Leninist](#) one-party regime who had a very prominent book, *China's Destiny*, that spelled out his vision.

So I think this asking for love is partly about this personalistic connection to him and the political order, rather than just a purely institutional one.

DEVIN STEWART: When you walk around China, do you have a sense that people are buying into it? Are they in a love affair with their leaders?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: Well, it's really hard to tell. Certainly, he is more charismatic and has more personal popularity than Hu Jintao. But that's like the proverbial tallest mountain in Kansas, I think is the line. You know, Hu Jintao had zero charisma, and Xi Jinping—there are people clearly who dislike him. You are talking about a very big and very diverse place. But there certainly is more of an omnipresence of his face and of his slogan. It's still not what there was under Mao.

I think the parallels to Mao are very problematic in differing ways, in part because Mao reveled in turning the world upside down periodically in a kind of mass action. Xi Jinping is all about order and control in a different way.

DEVIN STEWART: Another policy goal that the government these days in China is tackling is corruption. Xi Jinping has probably strategically picked corruption as a public source of frustration and displeasure, probably a politically astute goal to tackle. He is putting his campaign against corruption in ethical terms, which is not a surprise, but he's using references to [Confucius](#), for example, saying that Confucius would have advocated for a clean society and clean leadership.

It seems to strike me as an American that muzzling the press and civil society, which in American history has been the thing that tackles corruption, while calling for an anti-corruption campaign seems to be at odds with one another. I've heard differing stories on the anti-corruption campaign in China. I've heard varying assessments. My instinct is that Xi Jinping is going to have a very difficult time legitimately tackling a very difficult thing, corruption, that is tied to very, very intrinsic elements of human nature, such as greed—a very difficult thing to tackle without a strong, robust free press, free speech, and a free civil society.

What do you make of Xi Jinping's use of Confucius, and can it work? Can anti-corruption take place in such a stifled environment?

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: Going back to your last question about Xi Jinping's popularity, because I think this is very connected, a lot of the people who feel good about Xi Jinping feel good about him in part because he has gotten so serious about corruption. I think there is an understanding that corruption is this endemic enormous problem.

There have been anti-corruption drives by each of the previous leaders and a recognition of the worrisome nature of corruption. In fact, the Tiananmen protest in 1989 began with calls for an end to nepotism and corruption, which were then joined with calls for greater democracy and freedom of speech and things like that.

So there has been an awareness that corruption is the deep problem. In a lot of ways, what brought down the predecessor to the Communist Party, Chiang Kai-shek's [Nationalist Party](#), was a perception that it was very corrupt and nepotistic and a small group of tightly interconnected families were controlling a disproportionate amount of the wealth.

Xi Jinping has ramped up much more the anti-corruption moves that had been made previously. He has also ramped up what were already being made of the uses of Confucius and the call for a cleaner society that way.

So I think everything you've said about the limits of this in the long run, without a robust civil society and a press that can shine a light on any corner of society ideally where there is malfeasance, is true in the long run. But in the short run, what a lot of ordinary people, I think, are thinking is at least some of the bastards are being brought down.

Analysts—and I'm in this category—can point to the fact that there seems to be particular groups that are really being spared, that there is a selectivity in the targets that Xi Jinping is going after, that he is going after bigger targets sometimes—the so-called tigers as well as flies—that he's determined both of these pests need to be eradicated. But he's not going after people linked to him and his family or to groups near to them factionally, and there has been a tendency not to go after other people who are in family groups that date back to revolutionary figures from earlier generations. He's part of that group.

But for a lot of ordinary people, they've encountered this kind of corruption and people who are using connections and seem to be benefiting disproportionately from connections. They are seeing some of them suffer, they are thinking these people are guilty, and they are not as concerned, perhaps as an outside analyst would be, are all the guilty suffering equally—at least somebody is paying the price.

So I think in the long run there is that problem. But in the short run it may play fairly well and be part of his popularity.

DEVIN STEWART: So, in a sense, it is politically astute and savvy on his part.

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: Right. And it doesn't mean that it's not something he believes. It's very hard to know—it's such a black box—but he probably does believe that it will be better for the society if there is less of this corruption. But I think there is a lot of politically strategic savviness to what he's doing.

DEVIN STEWART: Jeff, we're almost out of time. It has been really interesting to talk with you. But it would be only fair and ethical if we talked about your project, your latest book. Tell us about that.

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: Okay. It's my shortest book, my cheapest book; and it's really tiny, it's 20,000 words, about like a long *New Yorker* article or something like that. It's called *Eight Juxtapositions: China Through Imperfect Analogies from Mark Twain to Manchukuo*.

What it does is uses eight chapters that try to use unusual comparisons that aren't perfect, that you can poke holes in, and try to use them to get out of what seem to be unproductive boxes in thinking about China, or to just shed a new kind of light on things.

In a way, I've given you a sense of them, even in the answers to your questions, that often Xi Jinping is compared to one or another figure, a small number of figures, like Mao or [Deng](#). But I suggest in the book in one chapter that we might put him beside [Putin](#) and think about in that case a post-communist figure, but one who seems to be reigning in civil society, at the same time trying to do different kinds of things to control the political order, and has also had his trouble, by the way, with feminist activists and has moved against them.

I suggest in another chapter actually to think about Xi Jinping beside the [pope](#), in the sense of having this enormous bureaucracy to deal with when he came in with a new mandate, and is a more personalistic leader than some of his immediate predecessors, and is dealing with what seems to be, better or worse, with an entrenched problem related to a different kind of corruption there.

I use these kinds of things. They are not all about individuals, but they are dealing with some aspect of China in the last eight years—there are eight juxtapositions, eight chapters, loosely tied to each of the last eight years—and in a playful, and I hope enjoyable-to-read, way tackles them.

It's available. It's a paperback in Australia and Asia and just as an eBook in the United States for now, though there may be a paperback coming soon.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you so much, Jeff. We look forward to checking it out, and thank you for seeing us here in New York.

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM: It has been fun. It has been great to talk to you again.

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