

The Nuanced Literary Voices in China

A Conversation with Megan Walsh and Rosie Blau

SEASON 3
episode two

audio clip

Megan Walsh

I do think that a lot of people don't ask questions about China, or like to see it as this monolith, because they simply just don't know what questions to ask. And I'm not blaming them for their ignorance, I just think it's a country that presents itself as a monolith.

Nicholas Lemann

Welcome to Underreported, I'm your host, Nicholas Lemann. Today, part two of our three-part series on the book called *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*. China is often seen as a monolith, especially by Westerners who think they know how Chinese citizens live, and even what their ideals are. But we want to dispel the master narrative. In her book, author Megan Walsh offers up a wide, nuanced variety of Chinese writing previously confined to Chinese readers. The works of fiction she has managed to uncover reach into the nooks and crannies of Chinese culture. They help us to better understand the country and its people. Megan Walsh joins us today from London. Welcome to Underreported.

Megan Walsh

Hi, thanks so much for asking me.

Nicholas Lemann

As does Rosie Blau, editor of *1843 Magazine*, and contributor to *The Economist* magazine in London.

Rosie Blau

Thanks, happy to be here.

Nicholas Lemann

I want to start out by setting up a straw man. Those of us who don't live in China, and haven't been there, and don't speak the language, tend to swallow unquestioningly an idea that we get from a lot of Western media, that this is a very repressive, authoritarian country that is getting more so. And so, there's no access

to any kind of sense of what Chinese people are thinking and doing, except through official channels and a few political dissidents. So I'm saying that so you can tell me why I'm wrong. So please tell me why I'm wrong.

Megan Walsh

Well I think the main reason is, as you rightly pointed out, that we have a media that tends to focus on binaries with China. It's a friend or foe; it's an oppressive state or an economic miracle. And we tend to also engage with China in the West as something that we are not. We define ourselves by our differences to it, especially in relation to things like censorship and the use of propaganda.

I think when I first went to China I went with that view myself, and I found myself interviewing various writers in a panel, and I asked them straight up about whether they're censored, and how they feel about self-censoring. And I instantly felt quite ashamed of the question, because I realized that it's something that they live with, they've lived with for a long time, but it also isn't the only prism through which they view the world, through which they work. And if that was something that they wanted to talk about, they would bring it up themselves.

But I realized from that point really, that it was really important to engage with what they were saying, rather than what they weren't saying, or what I assumed they were saying to please the government, or to submit to certain edicts.

Nicholas Lemann

Rosie, could you talk a little bit about your own experience with China, and how you react to the straw man I was setting up?

Rosie Blau

Sure. My first experience of China was in 1994, and I was an impressionable and ignorant 18 year old. I remember going—I was backpacking, and I went to Tiananmen Square. The 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square was basically, it was the first global news story, I think, that I really absorbed. I was 14 when it happened.

audio clip

[archived recording of Tom Brokaw]

Good evening. We all knew it couldn't go on forever, but no one thought it would come to this. A brutal massacre of Chinese students and other protestors by the Chinese army. We've asked NBC's George Lewis to take us through this long,

bloody battle.

[archived recording of George Lewis]

In the early morning hours of Sunday, armored personnel carriers began to advance on the square. There was a volley of tear gas, then without warning, the army opened up with bullets, firing indiscriminately at the crowd. [gunshots] One doctor estimated the number of dead at 500. The doctor said “my government has gone mad.”

And then here I was, an 18 year old in Tiananmen Square, and there were all these people who were—this was the pre-iPhone, pre-camera age really. People were kind of buying Polaroids of themselves with their picture in Tiananmen Square.

And I remember going to see Mao and his mausoleum, and here we are seeing this kind of icon of communism. And then you come out the other end and there’s a gift shop, and people are buying massage balls and playing cards and lots of different things. It was more that I was sort of confronted with my own stupidity. I realized I had no idea what questions to ask about China, that I had just assumed it was this kind of place, this thing that we’d been told by the government. And that actually, here was a billion-plus people living interesting, excited, sort of optimistic lives, or looking to the future and wondering about change. And that it was just much, much more complex and interesting and exciting and different than I’d thought.

And I do think that a lot of people don’t ask questions about China, or like to see it as this monolith, because they simply just don’t know what questions to ask. And I’m not blaming them for their ignorance, I just think it’s a country that presents itself as a monolith, and then we in general, outside China know so little about it we also don’t quite know how to unpick that monolith.

Nicholas Lemann

Take us, Rosie, a little forward with your story. You’ve gone from an innocent and misinformed 18-year-old to being the extremely well informed 22-year-old that you are now. So how did you get there?

Rosie Blau

I wish I was just 22. I would not say that I’m well informed. One of the things that’s strange about China is that the more you know it, the more you realize you don’t know it at all.

But anyway, I attribute China to being one of the reasons I became a journalist. I just realized it was incredibly interesting to try and work out how people lived, why people lived as they did. Whether that was China or elsewhere, it was just really incredibly exciting to kind of look around and ask questions and be presented with things that you didn't understand.

And so I was very, very lucky, and I went back there as China correspondent for The Economist in 2014. And actually, some of those early impressions are important, and continue to be the case. Because actually these days, it's really really hard to talk to anyone—even as a journalist for an official news publication etcetera, it's very hard to talk to anyone. In government, it's very hard to talk to any officials. I mean, you do do it, but not a lot. And so actually, as a journalist, you also spend a lot of time talking to those people and realizing that there's all these different view points and all these different sides to China.

And so my experience as a journalist also kind of reflects, I think, what Megan is writing about in her book. Which is there are all these different voices, all these different view points, and it's a much more diverse place than we initially thought.

Nicholas Lemann

Well, I'm a journalist, Rosie's a journalist, Megan's a journalist/critic. I know a fair number of fiction writers, so in a sense, I hope they're not listening, because they always say you cannot use fiction as evidence of what's going on in society; it's just a pure work of the imagination, and a work of art.

Okay, so I'm going to sort of break that rule, and say to the extent that you can read writing about what's going on in China, or writing about China—I think it's unfair to say as journalism, but as providing evidence about what Chinese life is like. Not what the Chinese government is doing, or what the Chinese government says is going on, but how ordinary people actually live. What do you learn, Megan?

Megan Walsh

The importance of fiction in China is that it is a medium that is chosen very specifically and intentionally by writers, because speaking plainly, speaking in prose and nonfiction can get you into quite a lot of trouble if you are tackling taboo subjects, historical ideas that have been re-written, or treated as mutable anyway by the government.

But I also think fiction, in terms of understanding the experience of everyday life

in China, is the perfect medium everywhere. It's about understanding the process of living, it's about trying to figure out what it means to be alive. And that's why most Chinese writers have chosen that medium to do that. And if you engage with the very peculiar, and diverse, and sort of fascinating range of fiction that's being produced at the moment, you get a sense that there is no commonality of experience. There's no ethnic or national narrative. There are just individual voices who are trying to figure out how they feel about their past, and what is going on at the moment.

Nicholas Lemann

If we're trying to use this writing to get a picture of China that isn't available in standard news, what would we see? There are kind of sociological and economic fault lines that we're familiar with: differences by generation, differences by geographical location, differences by class and education level. All those things. What are those fault lines in China that those of us who just read straight news don't see?

Megan Walsh

One of the main things is a sort of generational divide between people who experienced life under Mao and those who didn't.

audio clip

[archived recording]

China's next generation: are they living up to their potential? Our panelists weigh-in on pros and cons of China's emerging youth culture.

And that tends to also be seen through the prism of the rural and urban divide that people who grew up under Mao also had an experience of growing up in the countryside, living in the countryside, which connected them in some ways to the sort of agrarian structure of society before Mao.

And as a result, I think the experience of young people growing up in an urbanized China has been quite a difficult one. Primarily because it's not seen as difficult, and they have been really trying to figure out how to write, how to think about their lives, how to feel positive about them, when they feel like they've had it easy compared to their parents. And they're often told as much.

audio clip

[archived recording]

The next generation of China's youngsters have reacted to our rapidly changing world. The recent catch phrase "becoming Buddha" roasts China's millennials for their lack of work ethic and ambition. There's no denying that they are enjoying a comfort and freedom unheard of to their parents.

And I think that's a particularly tricky fault line for a lot of people who are born after the 1970s. It's a fault line that they are thinking about a lot and trying to navigate, especially in their writing. I think there's—I mean, Rosie, you must know that. What other fault lines do you think there are?

Rosie Blau

I think that's right. I mean, there is this sort of saying in China that it's a generation every seven years, or something, because change is so fast. And certainly when you're there you feel like you're watching change happen in front of you, even in kind of tiny things. It's just fascinating to see.

But one of the particular fault lines is with, as Megan says, with those who've experienced very rapid economic growth, and so in their lifetime seen this improvement in living standards. And then those who are born, say, post 1990s, when actually things were not bad already. This is the generation that's kind of reaping the benefits of economic reform. But they're not that grateful for it, because they didn't know anything different.

And I think those are—some of the writers that Megan writes about in her book are really quite young, and some would see as kind of quite frivolous, and unimportant. But those voices are so interesting, because those are the ones who are going to be dominant in society soon. And those are the people who are no longer so grateful to the Communist party. If we're looking to see fiction as a way to look at what happens in society, those are the people whose hopes and dreams are based on their own personal lives, as opposed to oh, will China be stronger, will China be this? And I think that we can see a lot in terms of people's optimism, and their hopes for themselves, and the smaller group around them in the fiction and in talking to people.

Nicholas Lemann

This is a terribly unfair question, because we're talking about a large, large, large number of people, but if either or both of you could talk a little bit about the younger generation in China that you've been talking about. What are they worried about? What are they happy about? What kind of lifestyle choices are they making? What's

younger generation culture like in China? Or if there's several subcultures, what are those?

Megan Walsh

So I think there's a huge range now. I think in the early days of reform and opening up there was a sense that there was no youth culture to speak of, and young people were trying to make sense of how they felt about the future without much of a roadmap to do it.

I think now there's—we're 30 years on from a very restless three decades of, as Rosie says, of rapid economic change—there's the people who've done very well out of it, and there's the people who feel like they never made it, they fell behind, they didn't make the most of that opportunity.

And I think that that has created all sorts of cultural factions which are quite countercultural, and arguably quite exciting. Sort of grumpy comics and people who are just devoted to escaping real life and writing about fancies of being omnipotent super heroes and incredibly attractive love interests.

But it's also bled into quite tangible movements. There's one at the moment which most people have probably heard of called the "lying down" or tangping, where people really want to opt-out of the rat race. They are tired of the pressure put upon them to be a somebody, to be really successful. And that has come from their parents, as well as propaganda surrounding national rejuvenation.

audio clip

[archived recording]

Young people are talking about why work so hard? Why do we have to fight so hard within our system? Yes, this is a problem. This is a challenge. That is how to provide proper opportunities and fair opportunities to the young population. This is a huge challenge. Okay, this is the biggest challenge, bigger than the challenge of population and demographics.

And I think that's quite a worry for the government. And it's I think offering a sense of release for them.

Rosie Blau

One of the things that's interesting, and both kind of sobering and exciting when you

ask people what they want in life, is that every often they'll tell you the same kind of thing that someone would tell you out on the street in London.

I remember meeting a Tibetan guy, he lived on the Tibetan Plateau, he'd never been outside his province, and I was like "If you could go anywhere, where would you go?" And he's like "Oh, I want to go to the Maldives." That was not the answer I expected. If we go there and think oh people are going to tell us that they want the vote, or they want democracy; they just don't. And they don't not say that because of censorship, it's just that's not forefront in people's minds.

So, often what you find is that people are talking about very similar hopes and dreams as you would get anywhere else. And some of the kind of big picture anxieties of the Chinese state are also not that different from anywhere else. This idea that things can keep on improving is no longer the case. In China, particular concerns are, say, pollution, or the education system, is it blocked up where you not enough people can get to the best universities or whatever.

There are particular concerns, but people no longer have this sense that their future—the future of their children will be better than there own lives. And so I think that's where you see things like this "lying down" movement in China, or people opting out of the traditional hopes and dreams.

But you also, I think—one of the things that's interesting in China is that you see very, very different expressions of youthful exuberance, and it's almost like everything is changing so fast. One summer, no one had tattoos, and then the next year when warm weather came around, suddenly you see that loads of people in Beijing have tattoos. And you sort of wonder, was there a message sent out saying it's okay now? Or you would suddenly see there would be a trend for people to wear this plastic mushroom flower in their hair, and suddenly, everyone's got this strange thing coming out of their hair.

These are tiny things, but to me, what they seemed to signify was that people in China, if we can generalize about such a thing, are still often—youth culture is still really shifting very, very fast. And it can change almost in the space of a couple of months. And people are finding different ways to express themselves, and don't necessarily know how.

And so, again, that kind of brings us back to something like literature, where in fiction you can often try out a mode of expression almost. And there are emotional truths in fiction that I think can be hard to express elsewhere.

Nicholas Lemann

So this is a lead into a new topic, which is the media environment, or the information environment. And I'll divide this into a couple of sub categories. First of all, the people that we're now talking about, or we've been talking about; younger people in China. Are they receiving material from outside of China that shapes how they choose to dress, what their attitudes are, and so on?

Megan Walsh

I can only really speak, I think, in terms of what they seem to be reading, and I think for a lot of the intellectually curious, of which there are many in China, they have access to all sorts of—they have access to everything they want to find. They read very widely. They're obsessed with translated fiction. And that does definitely shape how they are thinking and writing, and creating their own fictional universes I guess.

But as far as trends and fashions, I get the sense that there's been a slight shift in recent years, which is pegged to a degree of pride in being Chinese now, which doesn't need to default to the West, especially America, for its cultural influences. And I know the government has quite a big part to play in that in terms of programming of movies that are shown and things. But I get the sense that they are also really starting to take an interest in what young people themselves are creating, and what trends are being set in China itself. Would you agree with that, Rosie?

Rosie Blau

Yeah, if you—people in China have access to a lot of influences, and media, and lots of different things from outside. They shop in Zara, they shop in H&M, so they're buying the same clothes. There's a lot that is very much in common. There are different expressions of it, and actually the further west you go, the less influence you see of Western culture, and that's partly a financial thing. It's that people aren't buying as many clothes, and people aren't keeping up with trends and things.

The huge fakes industry, which we know about in China, you see people in very far-flung, very remote, very poor places wearing fake Chanel scarves. It's kind of fascinating, and interesting. And people who really want to, can also leap the Firewall, as it's known, the Chinese censorship of some internet sites, and read anything. It's certainly possible to do that from within China.

One of the movements that's interesting, that's being really pushed by the government is a movement towards wearing traditional clothes. Hanfu, which is this sort of—it's actually a made up uniform, but it's this sort of made up—the kind of

traditional Chinese clothes that people have conceived of rather recently as Chinese clothes. And you see people—kids are sent to classes to learn about Confucianism and Confucius’s teachings, and they’ll be wearing mini versions of hanfu. And people are getting dressed in traditional clothes and things.

And part of that is being pushed by the government, because it’s a bit scared of its own pop culture. It’s got to push something, and so traditional culture seems like a safe thing to do.

But part of that is, as Megan says, also about a genuine kind of pride and patriotism and excitement about being Chinese and knowing that you want to consume something of your own. So, it’s a nuanced picture, I think.

Nicholas Lemann

We’ve been talking about Western produced, or outside produced culture penetrating into China. Then, as we see in Megan’s book, there’s a vast amount of Chinese culture. Does any of it penetrate the West, or leave China and influence our children and people like that?

Megan Walsh

As far as I can tell, very little. And I think that goes back to what we were talking about at the beginning really. There’s just a sense that people think that culture produced in China is going to be in some ways under the thumb of the government, and therefore not really worth engaging with. And I think the one area that seems to be changing is with Chinese online fiction, which are these sort of epic superhero fantasies with very distinctive Chinese characteristics.

[audio clip in Mandarin]

But, they are increasingly being published in the West. There was one recently, which has just done very well on the New York Times bestseller list in its print form. I think we still haven’t embraced the Chinese way of engaging with those books, which is to devour them on our mobile phone every day. We still like to have a printed copy to read them. But, as far as I can tell, that’s the only thing that’s really culturally penetrating the West at the moment. Although, I put my money on music, maybe. Pop groups.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, I mean one of the things that's so original about your book is that very little of this material that you found out about and directed our attention to penetrates outside of China. So it all, as you're reading about it, comes across as fresh.

Rosie Blau

One of the things that's striking talking to a lot of Chinese people who speak fantastically good English is that they've learned a lot of that through just watching endless episodes of Friends, or The Big Bang Theory, or whatever it is that they've found fun to watch they'll just keep on watching. It's absolutely amazing when you meet some people who speak so fluently and with such extraordinary American accents who turn out never to have left the country.

[audio clip from Friends]

Joey: Alright, thanks, you're the best. Now listen, the last day of auditions is Thursday, okay, so I've got to get in there by Thursday, okay. Just remember Thursday. Thursday. Can you remember Thursday?

Chandler: Yeah, so Tuesday?

And I think China is struggling to produce anything like that. And that's partly because, coming back to the initial conversation about the government control of the culture industry, makes it hard to be as creatively brilliant as you want, if you're also being told that you must also come within certain confines of what the Communist party does and doesn't think is okay.

You've seen a bit more in film, but to me, often that's sort of almost kind of uber-stereotyped. Kung Fu Panda, really? It's not necessarily a problem with the films themselves, but it's the image that they are projecting of China, to me, goes back to that monolith that we saw at the beginning. It's not really the kind of exciting, surprising, shocking diverse China that I encountered when I went there. So I think in general, China is still struggling to project a kind of exciting, appealing image of itself culturally that is distinct from the Chinese lanterns and Chinese New Year celebrations, and that sort of thing.

Megan Walsh

Or, as we've said, the books that have been banned, which seem to be the other definition required for Western readers to want to read them. Or indeed films

which couldn't be shown in China. We have a huge appetite for that sort of culture. The stuff that's not allowed to be seen in China. But it doesn't mean there's much synergy between what Chinese people are reading and watching, and what we are reading and watching.

Nicholas Lemann

I assume the answer to this is yes, but just to ask it—does China have a coterie of internet stars who run their own brand and studio from their house and have assembled vast audiences? And if that's true, what do we find out when we see these people's work that attracts such a big following?

Megan Walsh

I think one of the earliest of these was actually a writer called Han Han, who was extremely combative and controversial at the time. He was I guess popular really about 10 years ago with a blog and some novels that he wrote.

audio clip

[archived recording]

I think a true writer, an author, is one who needs to give the government headaches. It doesn't matter what type of government. In China, it's the Chinese government, and in America, it's the US government. It's all the same.

Megan Walsh

What was really illuminating about him was he was very outspoken, very dismissive of the Chinese education system. He was one of the first people to show that you could not pass the Gaokao with flying colors and become a multi-millionaire.

I think what's been really interesting about his trajectory as a writer to a celebrity is that he is now just a professional celebrity, really. He races cars, makes movies which are pretty trashy, I think, and he has in a way set the model now for what the age of uber-celebrity is in China, which is about being more like an influencer really, rather than a cultural spokesperson or rebel.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. That sounds pretty familiar, as a parent in the US, because I feel like I'm fighting our influencers all the time.

We have to wind-up this obsession now. I urge everybody to tune into our third

podcast about Megan's book, which will feature just myself speaking to Megan. We'll go through with Megan her telling the story of how she got onto this subject. So please join us again, and thanks for being with us for this episode.

Megan Walsh

Thanks for having us.

Rosie Blau

Thanks.

Nicholas Lemann

Thanks for listening to part two of our podcast series on *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*. In our next episode, how Megan found the Chinese writings, what story they tell, and how her book allows us to examine our own relationship with art and politics.

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

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I'm Nick Lemann, thanks for listening.