

## Interview - Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Written by E-International Relations

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Interview - Jeffrey Wasserstrom

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/11/18/interview-jeffrey-wasserstrom/>

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, NOV 18 2015

Dr. Jeffrey Wasserstrom is Chancellor's Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine and the Editor of *Journal of Asian Studies*. Author of many books on Chinese history, including *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China*, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010* and *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Dr. Wasserstrom has written extensively on Chinese society, history and politics for publications such as *Newsweek*, *Time* and *The New York Times*. He blogs for *Huffington Post* and co-edits the Asia Section of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

**How has the way you understand modern China changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

I first started thinking about China in the late 1970s, after I took my first college class on Chinese history. The country has changed so dramatically since then that it is hard to know where to start, as like so many other people I've had to discard some basic notions, such as that China was and might always be a predominantly rural country. One thing that has been a constant—and I expect to stay one—has been my sense that to understand what is going on in the country now it is crucial to pay attention to its history, not just in the sense of what happened in the past, but also of how historical events and actors are thought about and discussed inside China.

The first college paper on China I did, that I still remember anything about, was an effort to analyze similarities in the rhetoric behind Deng Xiaoping's call for pursuit of the "Four Modernizations" and the writings on self-strengthening of late nineteenth century figures, such as Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang. I was interested to see how after Deng's call, Zeng and Li, who had been viewed critically in Mao's day for having suppressed the allegedly progressive and proto-revolutionary Taiping Uprising, began to get more favorable treatment in China. When I wrote the paper, the big question on the minds of many people was: would China ever be able to modernize, or would Deng's programs leave the country, as Zeng and Li's had, still trying to catch up with Japan and the West in economic and development terms.

Now, of course, many people worry about a China that may have come too far too fast, rather than one that is not developing. Other themes in that long-ago paper, though, remain relevant. For example, the rhetoric of Xi Jinping, no less than of self-strengtheners and Deng, is infused with the notion that the government needs to do some things that other countries have done, yet do them in a way that is rooted in specifically Chinese traditions, whether Confucian or Communist or, in Xi's case, somehow both. There has also been a tendency to think that opening up politically should take a backseat. Lots of things change, but there are also themes that keep recurring.

**Where do you see the most exciting research and debates in the fast-growing field of China Studies, within the Social Sciences? In what direction are they leading the field?**

There are fewer exciting debates underway just now in China Studies, at least in the parts of it that I track most closely, than there used to be. I'm thinking of the ones that once raged over the relative importance of nationalism, social programs, and organizational strength in explaining the reason the CCP defeated the Nationalists in 1949—a debate that led to some fascinating detailed studies of different Communist base areas. There are *debates*, of course, such as the ones that periodically flare up over whether the CCP is on the edge of collapse. However, I see

## Interview - Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Written by E-International Relations

those as often generating more heat than light, being interesting sometimes, yet not as fruitful in terms of leading to novel and informative studies, as the older debates were.

This said, there's plenty of fascinating work being done, which is less about staking out a position in a debate than illuminating topics we haven't known enough about, yet realize are important. Some fields that seem especially interesting just now in this way include: the history of medicine and technology, daily life in the Mao years (1949-1976), the experience of war, the history of the environment, and the study of frontier zones and efforts to link up the histories of Han Chinese in China and overseas.

**In the aftermath of the Financial Crisis of 2008, some observers have argued that China no longer sees the West as a model, as it has done since the nineteenth century, and, instead, seeks to build an indigenous form of modernity. Do you see China getting disenchanted with the West as a model to emulate?**

Going back to my first answer, I think there's been an interest in figuring out how best to modernize while preserving something distinctive. This is one reason why, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there was such intense interest in what Japan was doing, as it seemed to have figured out a way to borrow from the West while maintaining special features of its old system, and, simply by drawing from different Western models, come up with something unique. Singapore has more recently been appealing to some Chinese officials for homologous reasons. Some things have definitely changed; among other things, China is now being looked to by some other places as a model in the way that some in China once looked to Japan. Still, it is change within an enduring pattern.

**In your commentary of various protests in China, you have argued that the May 4th protests in 1919 serve as the prototype of all later protest movements in China. The May 4<sup>th</sup> protests featured a powerful combination between social grievance and nationalism which, some scholars argue, is reemerging in present-day China and might erupt again. Do you see such a scenario happening?**

I think in the broadest sense, the potential for some kind of fusing of social grievances and nationalism, thought of broadly to include the sort of love of country we tend to refer to as patriotism, as well as the more xenophobic varieties of nationalist fervor, is still a possibility. It wouldn't necessarily be something in which students and other intellectuals played the roles they did in 1919—and then again in 1989. It might involve things that seem on the surface far removed from the May 4th protests, such as, for example, anger at the government over failing to handle an environmental catastrophe in an appropriate way. Still, I think the combustibility of frustration that a country you love is not governed by good people or in a good way remains, and there are certainly some symbols and modes of action that go back to 1919 (and beyond) that you sometimes see again in contemporary protests.

**In your comments on the Hong Kong protests you have noted a contradiction between the protesters' attempt to draw on the legacy of earlier Chinese protest movements, such as the Tiananmen movement, and their vocal rejection of a Chinese national identity. Do you think the protesters face a choice whether to be a Chinese protest movement or an anti-Chinese, Hong Kong one?**

I think that a lot of protests are eclectic in the way they draw on local and international traditions and that, perhaps not surprisingly given Hong Kong's cosmopolitan history, those involved in the Umbrella Movement were even more eclectic than most. There's a lot of tension in Hong Kong linked to thinking about what it means to be Chinese, but I don't think it is all either/or, just as protesters in the American colonies could draw on the rhetoric and symbolism of English protest traditions in the 1770s.

**Some scholars have suggested that, as China rises, it will seek to restore the China-centered, hierarchical international order that existed in East Asia before the advent of western imperialism, a view that others have criticized as simplistic. What is your position on this debate and why?**

I guess I'm a bit of a middle-roader here, in the sense that I think it would be foolish to ignore the interest in precedents, yet also don't see them as deterministic. I'm still waiting to see more work on the subject come out, not

## Interview - Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Written by E-International Relations

just in IR studies per se, by people ranging from David Kang to William Callahan, who approach it from different angles, but also from scholarly minded journalists of the sort I take seriously. For example, one of the best such journalists, Howard French, is working on a book about the topic and recently showcased some of his thinking on it in a long piece for the *Guardian*.

**You have written on how the West and particularly the US misunderstand China. If you can list the three most harmful Western misconceptions about China, what would they be?**

- That China never really changes, keeps doing exactly what it has always done, just dressing it up in different language, and is an utterly unique place that can't be compared to any other place.
- That China has changed so much in recent years that its past is no longer especially relevant, as it is or will soon be just like other places that have reached a similar stage of economic development.
- That there is little diversity of opinion among the Chinese people.

**Anniversaries of historical events and their commemoration seem to play an increasing role in Chinese society, particularly the anniversaries related to Japan's historical aggression against China. How much do you think this tendency to commemorate Japan's aggression can take a life of its own and hence become a powerful force shaping China's Japan policy, beyond the control of the Chinese government?**

Anniversaries are very important in China—and in many other places as well, of course. I'm watching the lead up and the playing out of the World War II anniversaries across East Asia and beyond with a lot of interest this year, and that's one reason I commissioned a trio of reflections on just this issue for the *Journal of Asian Studies* from historians I admire: Japan specialist Carol Gluck, China specialist Rana Mitter, and Koreanist Charles Armstrong (those are up on the web and for a time free to download—apologies for plugging something in a periodical I edit). Memories of and stories about Japanese aggression are things the Chinese Communist Party has made a lot of effective use of since 1989 in its patriotic education drives, partly to deflect attention from things closer to the present and closer to home that cause discontent. The Party is, however, nervous about the potential this could have to let a genie out of the bottle that it can't control, as leaders do know that their country's history includes moments when the sorts of fusing of social and nationalist concerns we spoke about earlier have created problems for those in control. So, we have seen anti-Japanese protests encouraged by the state and also reined in by the state, and that dynamic might well continue.

**What is the most important advice you want to give to young scholars of International Relations who are interested in China and its foreign policy?**

Spend time in China and also in other parts of the world, as it is important to get a sense of how the country is seen, thought, talked about, admired, and feared in places other than whatever you call home. Learn another language, if you can and are good at languages, so that you can have a multisided view of debates involving China. And even if you don't do either of these things, pay attention to the scholarship being done on and press from multiple places. We live in global times—though I would argue, times were pretty global a century or so ago, too—and much of the best work on Chinese history and contemporary China has a comparative or transnational side to it. A lot of the IR scholars and historians of China's shifting place in the world I am keeping an eye on come at the issues with an awareness of and interest in multiple places, either because of their personal history or because of training, or both. To mention just one more recent *Journal of Asian Studies* piece, we ran something on "China in Africa, Viewed from Brazil" by a scholar, Adriana Abdenur, who is based in South America but has lived and done fieldwork in Asia and speaks and reads Chinese and Portuguese. Other examples include Adam Cathcart and John Delury, China specialists who have strong interests in Korea and sometimes move between different parts of Asia in their writings, and Yang Daqing, who is from Nanjing but specializes in Japanese history—these sorts of combinations are the sorts that often seem to lead to people writing things I find particularly interesting. Yet another such scholar is Maria Repunikova, whose ability to toggle between Russia and China in her writings about contemporary politics also leads to interesting results, and shows through even in pieces that aren't explicitly comparative. I guess, selfishly in part, I'd love to see more work by people who can bring together experiences in, deep reading about, and sometimes knowledge of the languages of a different part of the world than those I know best when writing about China. I'm

## **Interview - Jeffrey Wasserstrom**

Written by E-International Relations

never sure where the cut-off is in a term like “young scholars,” but all of the people I’ve mentioned above—just some names that came to mind as I was responding—are certainly younger than me, some a lot younger.

—

*This interview was conducted by Ivan Lidarev. Ivan is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.*