

## Jeffrey Wasserstrom &amp; “Vigil”

SEASON 2  
episode seven

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Nicholas Lemann

Welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. I’m Nicholas Lemann. Today’s guest is Jeffrey Wasserstrom, one of the leading American experts on Hong Kong. He has been a regular visitor there for decades and an eyewitness to many of its dramatic events in recent history.

His new book, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*, represents a rare example of deep historical, cultural, and political context, produced on deadline about a major ongoing news event. Drawing on a rich store of knowledge and wisdom in writing with literary power as well as analytic rigor, Wasserstrom makes us understand the deep roots and the broad significance of the tragedy we see unfolding day by day in Hong Kong. Jeff, thank you for joining us.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

It’s my pleasure.

Nicholas Lemann

Just to start at the beginning, Jeff, tell us some of your history with Hong Kong. When did you first start going there?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I first went to Hong Kong for several weeks in early in 1987. I was midway through a year of doing dissertation research in Shanghai about the history of student protests. And when I went to Hong Kong then, it really wasn’t to do research – well, it was to poke around a little bit for materials about Shanghai that were held there – but it was actually to kind of get away from the politics that I was studying. It was going to a different, what was a different part of the world then, because Hong Kong was still a colony of the British Empire. And I’ve gone back frequently since then.

Nicholas Lemann

Let’s sort of start our narrative of Hong Kong, if you think this is a good place to start, with the handoff. When Britain turned control back to China, or to China, in the 1990s. Why did that happen and what were people expecting?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

So the reason why it happened was that Hong Kong island became a British colony at the end of the Opium War as a kind of victor's prize that Britain got in 1841. And then another part of what is now Hong Kong, Kowloon Peninsula, became another victor's prize colony in 1860 after a Second Opium War.

But then a lot of what is now Hong Kong, a whole set of other islands and villages and territory connected to Kowloon, known as the New Territories, became part of the colony of Hong Kong in 1898. But it didn't become a permanent part. There was a 99-year lease.

So from that point on, there was the strong possibility that at least the new territories, but probably all of Hong Kong, would revert to Chinese control in 1997. And that's what happened, based on an agreement that was worked out.

The main part of the agreement was worked out between Margaret Thatcher and Deng Xiaoping's governments in 1984. And in the lead-up to that, there was a lot of speculation about what would happen once Hong Kong became part of this Communist Party-run state. Hong Kong was a capitalist city, becoming part of a Communist Party-run state, that had just never really happened.

So there was a lot of speculation and it took different forms depending on what was going on in China. When the deal was struck in 1984, China was moving in a liberalizing direction and there was a lot of hope that it would continue to move much more dramatically in that liberalizing direction.

Then in 1989, there was the crackdown on protesters and the June 4th massacre in Beijing. And then there was a lot of fear that China was moving in back in a much more authoritarian direction.

And then in the lead-up, the immediate lead-up up to 1997, there were signs that at least economically liberalization was still on course, even if politically it wasn't. So then the speculation ranged in a couple of directions, both of which proved wrong, or at best, partially true. And Hong Kong has a long tradition of making fools out of forecasters.

But there were people who thought that immediately after the Communist Party took control of Hong Kong – even though in the deal worked out, Hong Kong was supposed to enjoy a high degree of autonomy for 50 years, under something called a “One country, Two Systems” arrangement that would preserve many of its modes of

life, there were people who thought, “Well, as soon as it becomes part of the People’s Republic of China, there’ll be no more free press, there’ll be no separation of powers, there’ll be no independent courts.” And that didn’t happen. A lot of things did continue on.

There were other people who predicted that Hong Kong would somehow sort of be a force to transform China when it became part of the Chinese body politic, and that mainland cities would become more and more like Hong Kong, and of ideals of a freer press would percolate over the border.

That happened a little bit, and it certainly happened in terms of patterns of leisure and consumption. Chinese cities like Shanghai became much more like Hong Kong when it came to malls, when it came to restaurants, when it came to movie theaters. But there certainly wasn’t a move toward the press in a city like Shanghai becoming like the press in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, newspapers can make fun of the person in charge of the city and can, in fact, make fun of the person in charge of the People’s Republic of China. And no mainland city has newspapers like that. So something more complicated happened, which was a little bit of each of those things, but neither sort of dire predictions or hopeful predictions proved correct.

Nicholas Lemann

Did you think at the time that China itself was going to keep moving in a Western liberalizing direction?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I never thought, I never bought into the idea that there was going to be a convergence of systems between China and the West. That, you know, this was popular around the end of the Cold War when these dramatic changes happened in the Soviet bloc, and also when people had seen authoritarian states like South Korea as they got big middle classes, become more, turned into something more like a liberal democracy.

But I did think, I did fall into the trap perhaps, of thinking that China was moving in the late 1990s and early 2000s to becoming a somewhat more tolerant place. Certainly a less hard authoritarian place. Perhaps still authoritarian, but something different, but something softer.

And then, after 2008, the move has been in the other direction. In the lead-up to,

in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when I would go to China, the mainland cities, I would sort of look. You know, I'd go into a bookstore – could I buy more books than the last time I was there on edgy topics? And the answer was usually yes. Were there more subjects that people were willing to talk about? And the answer was yes. Since 2008, when I've gone back periodically, I've never felt that compared to the year before, things are freer. I've always felt that they're more tightly controlled.

Nicholas Lemann

So one thing is that I remember people saying, you know, around the turn of the century, was that you couldn't economically liberalize without liberalizing on other dimensions, too. Because, for example, investment capital would want reliable information. It made sense to me at the time. Why didn't that dynamic happen?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I mean, the other thing that people said related to that was when people have more choices at the grocery store, then they'll soon want more choices at the ballot box. And this was a powerful way of thinking. But one of the things is, the Chinese Communist Party knew about these dynamics and wanted to avoid going in that direction.

The Chinese Communist Party is a diagnostic organization, and an experimental organization. So it has a formal ideology, but it's always tinkering with it. And one thing that the leaders want above all else is to keep their party in power. And they saw cases where when these phenomenon happened, the end result was an end to one party rule. They didn't want that happen.

So they kind of thought about how can we adjust the formulas, or adjust things. And so one of the things they did, certainly with the middle class, they tried to find ways to co-opt members of this increasing middle class. And they also began playing very hard to nationalism.

And this was at a time actually, when globally, nationalism of a kind of "make my country great again" mode was coming into fashion different ways, and they had their own version of that, they have had.

So in different ways they've done that. And in some ways perhaps, having the differentiation, Hong Kong is a special administrative region where you can do some things economically that you can't on the mainland. And Macao, which was a Portuguese colony that became part of the PRC in 1999, is another place you can do some things differently.

So maybe, and to some degree, having those places that were part of the country but kind of cordoned off, that had more trusted – well Hong Kong in particular – had more trusted financial structures, was something that could help them. Ironically, rather than Hong Kong being something that helped democratize China, it may have helped retard that kind of, hold back that kind of democratization.

Nicholas Lemann

I know you talked to Chris Patten, who is the last British official with oversight over Hong Kong. What did he say?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

So Chris Patten, during the lead-up to 1997, he was the last British governor, as you said. The deal was going to be that whatever Hong Kong was in 1997, it would continue to be for 50 years. Hong Kong had never had real democracy in the sense that the top official was appointed by London, but it did have an elected legislature, and it had elections for other things.

And what Chris Patten did in the lead-up was to try to make Hong Kong a bit more democratic before having to hand it over. Which he thought of as a way as helping to protect the Hong Kong people once they became part of China. And some people in the Beijing government thought was cheating because they were supposed to inherit Hong Kong as it was, not a revised version of it. And there are people who criticized Patten for not going far enough in these directions.

So he's since then, he's been a very interesting commentator on Hong Kong, who I think, or the impression I got talking to him, takes a certain amount of pride in having done what he did, but also understands that there's a certain failure to what he did, and also to – Britain was supposed to keep watch on, and be the main foreign power with an interest in, Hong Kong, and to try to make sure that Beijing lived up to its promises. And he sees, as I do, that Beijing hasn't been living up to the promises in recent years.

So he seemed quite conflicted by this. But I kind of expected that that would happen. I didn't expect him to make one of the most poetic comments that anybody did in an interview with me. I asked him what he thought of a proposition that was forming in my mind as I was going to write the book, which was that historians of the future, looking back at Hong Kong in the late 20th, early 21st century, might say something like, it was surprising first, how light a touch Beijing exerted over Hong Kong for the first 15 years or so after the handover. And then it would also surprise them, seem

surprising, how quickly they began to tighten controls after that. And he nodded, thought about it, and then said something, I quote it exactly in the book, but it was something to the effect of when the snow melts, it starts melting quickly. And I thought that was, I mean, I was pleased that he agreed with my kind of assessment as somebody who watched this so closely. But I also thought the metaphor there was quite powerful.

Nicholas Lemann

Does he think, or do you think there is anything he could have done differently then, that would have made things turn out differently from how they have now?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I don't know about his case. I think there's so much speculation. I mean, there's a lot of speculation among Hong Kong writers that I've been following. Some of what – there have been periods when people have blamed him or have blamed other people involved in the negotiation. But lately, what I've noticed is some, and at an earlier point, have said that if only the people of Hong Kong had expressed more outrage earlier.

There's a kind of almost generational guilt. Some older Hong Kongers are saying, "Why couldn't we have shown the kind of outrage at the way our interests were being overlooked during this negotiation in which we didn't really have a say, that it was London and Beijing who were deciding our fate. Why weren't we out on the streets in these enormous numbers?" And there were big protests in 1989, before and after the massacre in Beijing by people in Hong Kong who wanted to show solidarity with the protesters, or outrage at the massacre.

But it's very interesting. I mean, there's a site, China Heritage, that's translated – it's out of New Zealand – that's translated a lot of writings by Hong Kong intellectuals, including some older ones who have talked about this sort of admiration for young people laying their bodies on the line. And there have been protests, the solidarity marches recently, by people who call themselves "gray hairs" or other things to flag their senior-ness and say that they're doing this to show support for this younger generation.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's go forward a little to the Umbrella Movement and tell us about that. How did it start and how much of it did you see and what difference did it make?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

So the Umbrella Movement, there was a kind of a pre-history of the Umbrella Movement in 2012. There were plans to bring in a new kind of patriotic education into the high schools and middle schools and some very young students, one of them, Joshua Wong, who was 14 then and became one of the, became the most recognizable face of the Umbrella Movement later.

He and classmates like Agnes Chao organized a group called Scholarism that protested this proposed curriculum change, and the government backed down and withdrew it. So two years later, that generation of students, and ones a little bit older, who were in college, were one group that joined in the Umbrella Movement.

But there was another group led by three older intellectuals, two professors and one preacher, who, inspired partly by Occupy Wall Street, wanted to have something called Occupy Central with Love and Peace. And that was going to be to push for truly democratic elections for the chief executive. There were going to be elections coming up. And the chief executive of Hong Kong is chosen through an election, but it's one that only about 2000 people get to vote in, and they can only vote for candidates vetted by Beijing.

And so the result is always somebody who is a proxy of sorts for Beijing and in league with the richest people in Hong Kong, the sort of tycoons who have worked out – some of them different views, but most of them are sort of in league with Beijing politically.

So they started this Occupy, they called for this Occupy Central, and then students at the same time sort of took to the streets again and had student strikes. And what became the Umbrella Movement was this combination of these things in which the student activists became, to some extent, the leading force, and the Occupy Central figures backed them.

But there were three Occupy zones in different parts of Hong Kong: the one in the central district, their equivalent of Wall Street, and then two others, including one in a working-class district across the water in Kowloon. So I went over in – oh, and the movement really took off and shifted to being the Umbrella Movement and shifted to something more militant, not using violent tactics, but using more in-your-face tactics than the original Occupy movement was going to, when police used tear gas against protesters in late September.

And that's very unusual in Hong Kong. The police just didn't do that, except in very,



very rare occasions previously. And the police were largely admired and seen as a very restrained force. And this led to a kind of radicalization of protests that led to a more confrontational attitude, and to call on the chief executive, rather than rather than trying to use gentle means.

So it was still largely nonviolent. I went over in November of that year, and I only spent several days there, but I spent them all on the streets and going to the Mong Kok Kowloon-side Occupy zone, as well as to the central one. And noting the differences between those, different kinds of concerns, more concerns with issues of social inequality in the Mong Kok side, and more kind of international cosmopolitanism to some extent in the central side. And both though, a lot of kind of beauty.

It was one of the most utopian settings, probably the most utopian setting I've ever spent time in. And it definitely hooked me on committing myself to doing more work on Hong Kong. Because until then I had thought I was interested in social movements of a sort involving youth, that the main story was on the mainland.

For most of the early part of my career, I focused backward in time on the mainland, and I just didn't really think of Hong Kong as the place where the things I cared about were happening. And it really struck me in 2012, and even more so in 2014, that Hong Kong was the place in the People's Republic of China, where the traditions of protest that I had been drawn into Chinese studies to study were alive and were taking really interesting forms.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's use that as a place to stop the first part of this podcast. Thanks. This has been a discussion with Jeffrey Wasserstrom, author of *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*. Look out for part two of our discussion in our podcast feed soon. As a reminder, you'll find links to all of Columbia Global Reports, books, blog, events, and more at [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu). I'm Nick Lemann, thanks for listening.