

2011

Straight Out of Wukan: A Quick Q & A with Journalist Rachel Beitare

Jeffrey Wasserstrom
The China Beat

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Wasserstrom, Jeffrey, "Straight Out of Wukan: A Quick Q & A with Journalist Rachel Beitare" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 11.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

[Straight Out of Wukan: A Quick Q & A with Journalist Rachel Beitare](#)

December 20, 2011 in [Interview](#) by [jwasserstrom](#)

By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Earlier this year, a Beijing-based Israeli journalist named Rachel Beitare contacted me out of the blue to set up an interview about the impact the Arab Spring events might have in China. I ended up impressed by the caliber of the questions put to me, so I started keeping an eye out for her byline, in case she published things in English (much of her work comes out in Hebrew, which I don't read). I wasn't disappointed, as before long Foreign Policy ran a smart commentary, "[Guilty By Association](#)," in which Ms. Beitare looked at the way the Party had been not just cracking down on critics of the government but hassling their relatives as well. When I opened a Twitter account, she was someone I made sure to follow (she tweets as [@bendilaowai](#)), and she's one of several China-based journalists I think uses the medium especially well.

I was thus excited to learn from her Twitter posts that she'd made it to Wukan to report on the dramatic events unfolding in that South China community, where villagers have been mourning a fallen protester while engaged in a stand-off with representatives of the government. A recent NPR report described the Wukan struggle as a conflict that "began as a property dispute [and] has escalated into an open revolt [that has become] one of the most serious episodes of unrest that the Chinese Communist Party has faced in recent years." The Wukan events are important because they underscore just how much anger there is in China over efforts by unscrupulous developers and corrupt officials to take advantage of rural landholders, and have a special interest to me, since just before the story broke [Megan Shank](#) and I had made the final corrections on a story, "Anxious Times in a Rising China," which will appear in the Winter issue of Dissent magazine and focuses on recent protests and expressions of discontent in the PRC.

Eager to learn more about what is going on and to find out what she makes of it, I sent Ms. Beitare an email with a set of questions; these are provided along with the answers she sent in Tuesday morning (Beijing time):

JW: You recently tweeted that you'd finished a report on the protests. Is it online yet? If not—or if it is only up in Hebrew—can you fill me in on what sort of piece it is, if there's a main take-away about the state of play or likely prospects of the struggle?

RB: Thank you very much for this kind introduction. The report I was tweeting about will come out in Hebrew this Thursday. It's a magazine piece for "Calcalist" in which I try to chronicle events in Wukan pretty much hour by hour from Saturday onward (we are still updating it). That was actually my editor's suggestion and was a good way to give a sense of a story in progress and to record the ups and down in daily life in Wukan these days. It is a bit like tweeting actually. We also tried to give a broader perspective in the text to show how each of Wukan's grievances is related to a broader issue in China. I suppose the main take-away is that

whereas Wukan's problems are local, a real long-term solution can only come through some wider government reforms in China. I really don't have a definite view regarding the prospects of the struggle, but I'm not very optimistic. I'm afraid at least for the leaders of these demonstrations, there will be severe retribution, though for the village as a whole, they might get some of their land back, so it can make things a bit better, but I don't see much chance of a fundamental change under the current system of village governance.

JW: I've been following the Wukan events long distance via reports like [a much-circulated early one by Malcolm Moore](#) and the [later one by Louisa Lim](#), from which I pulled the phrases used in my opening summary. Have these given me a clear basic sense of what's been going on and the stakes of this confrontation? Is there anything crucial that you feel is being left out or underplayed in the international coverage of the standoff?

RB: The reports you've mentioned were probably some of the best to come out of Wukan, and of course Malcolm Moore deserves all the credit for being the first to break the story to international media. In general I think there has been a lot of really excellent reporting from many different angles. Obviously I haven't read all the reports, so I can't say if something has been left out. (Last night in Wukan's improvised media center, a few locals asked me to show them via my computer whether their issue was really being reported. We did a Google news search that came back with some 1300 hits in English and hundreds in Chinese.) However, one point I can think about that will probably still be open for much discussion is the role the foreign media itself has been playing in this story. Inviting the media in was the villagers' own decision and helped them get a lot of publicity, but it may land them in even bigger trouble in the end than if they hadn't. I think we all need some distance from the situation to properly analyze the pros and cons.

JW: A month or so ago, I would probably have been tempted to flag the high-speed rail crash of July as the most significant Chinese political event of 2011, due to the rage unleashed online by the event itself and the Party's efforts to cover-up what had happened. Others might have put Ai Weiwei's detention at the top of their list. Do you think Wukan might tell us even more important things about sources of discontent in today's China than either of those two things?

RB: Oh absolutely. The reason Wukan is such a gripping story is that the village's situation encapsulates almost all of the big issues that trouble Chinese society: Rural poverty vs. rapid development, unchecked power, growing economic gaps, environmental degradation, corruption, official violence, the balance of power between Beijing and the provinces, it's all there in one incident. Also, the power of the Internet and social media, as well as their limitations—that was demonstrated in the Wenzhou train crash case and with Ai Weiwei and is also present here.

What's more, the Wukan case is different than either Wenzhou's or Ai Weiwei's in that it takes place in the countryside, where most Chinese still live and where the problems are most acute, but get little attention, so definitely it touches all the most serious reasons for discontent.

JW: Any final thoughts? Perhaps about lines that could be drawn, however tenuous, to connect developments in Wukan to the Middle East and North Africa or the Occupy protests in other parts of the world.

RB: Well, unlike the people in Egypt or Libya, in Wukan they clearly and repeatedly say they do not wish to overthrow the government and trust the Communist party. How sincere they are in saying this remains for us to speculate about but that is the message they want to get out.

Having said that, there are some similarities to some movements we've seen around the world this year in both causes and conduct. They are similar in that protest stems from a sense of gross injustice caused by ever growing economic gaps. Another similarity is in the way people form their own mechanisms for self governing a micro-environment, in Wukan like in Tahrir or in tent cities in NYC, Madrid, my hometown, Tel-Aviv, and elsewhere around the world, and in how people gradually find ways to educate themselves about their own situation, the causes of what is happening to them and valid ways to solve their problems.

The situation here is very different, but maybe the sentiment of people power, the will and ability to work together with others to achieve better results instead of trying to get results individually is very similar. Ironically, educating and organizing peasants is how the Communist Party itself got to power so they probably understand better than anyone else the potential of such developments in rural areas, which is why the Wukan case is important—and the situation very risky for Wukan's people.

This post also appeared at [Dissent](#).