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Writing About a Fast-Changing China

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On Friday, April 23, China Beat and the UCI Humanities Collective hosted a dialogue between journalist Mara Hvistendahl and UCI Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom on “Writing About a Fast-Changing China: Notes from the Borderland Between Scholarship and Journalism.” The lively discussion covered Hvistendahl’s experiences in China, the differences in writing for a popular audience as an academic versus as a journalist, and Hvistendahl’s current book project (due out in 2011) on prenatal sex selection and gender imbalance.

While on campus, Hvistendahl was able to meet with several local scholars of China’s birth policies, Susan Greenhalgh and Wang Feng. Wang Feng was quoted this weekend in an Associated Press article on the one-child policy, “China May Ease Long-hated One-child Rule”:

China’s population will peak at 1.4 billion in 2026 and then start shrinking, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By the end of this century, China’s population would be cut almost in half to 750 million, according to a model developed by Wang Feng, a demographer at the University of California, Irvine. That would still be two and a half times bigger than the U.S. today.

Wang says the government’s focus on slowing population growth has dangerous side effects.

In just 10 years, the age 20-24 population is expected to be half of today’s 124 million, a shift that could hurt China’s economic competitiveness by driving up wages. Over the same period, the proportion of the population over 60 is expected to climb from 12 percent — or 167 million people — to 17 percent.

“We feel like we’re seismologists, you know,” said Wang, who has helped lead a data-driven campaign to persuade the government to drop the one-child policy. “This earthquake is happening and most people don’t see it. We feel we have the knowledge to detect this and we should tell the public.”

A podcast of the conversation between Hvistendahl and Wasserstrom will be available in the coming weeks.