Jeremiah (00:01)
Hello, and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah Jenne, broadcasting from sunny springtime Geneva. With me as always in not so sunny evening Beijing is David Moser. It's 8.30 PM there, David. Jazz musicians are just getting up and I assume you are too. How are things?

David (00:22)
Yeah, just having my morning coffee here. I don't know about you, Jeremiah, but I've been trying to be very disciplined this week and stay off Twitter and social media and anything that has Trump in it, just for my mental health. I've had a few interesting conversations with people coming through Beijing here who say things like, can you help me figure out a way to come here with some kind of teaching job or anything? I'd like to spend the next few years here. So I'm getting this sense that, well, it's not a sense, I guess we have lots of information and lots of examples and even statistics of people leaving the country. I saw something in the newspaper about some percentage of; I think it said three-fourths of all scientists, which is a very vague term, want to leave America, which is ridiculous. But even if it's just one out of a hundred, that's a pretty serious brain drain. Anyway, I'm happy to be here and I, and right now kind of ignorant about the news about what's happening in the left, right war in the United States. It feels pretty good.

Jeremiah (01:27)
If you're looking to break your news blackout, you'll be in luck because today with us is…

David (01:32)
I didn't say China. I didn't say I was blocking China news. It's the other country that I'm boycotting right now.

Jeremiah (01:39)
…Of course, because with us today is an award-winning journalist and international correspondent for NPR, Emily Feng, who has reported from China for seven years from 2015 until 2022. She then spent two years reporting from Taiwan before recently relocating back to the United States. Emily has a new book out this month, Let Only Red Flowers Bloom, which explores Chinese identity through personal stories of individuals living within and outside China's borders. Emily, how are you doing? Thank you for joining us so early in the morning.

Emily Feng (02:10)
Not so early but thank you so much for having me and David. I'm really sorry. Not only am I a journalist, all I think about is news, but I'm calling you from the other country. I promise not to say anything about it.

David (02:16)
Okay, thank you.

Jeremiah (02:22)
One of the first things I thought of when I was reading your book is this idea of identity and the notion that the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping has demonstrated over the last few

years, and particularly the years that you were reporting, that it is not a fan of diversity, equality, or inclusion. that's linguistic, cultural, or religious diversity, or in the silencing of voices calling for greater awareness and equality for women in the LGBTQ community.

I don't know, given what's happening in that other country, given what's happening in the United States under Donald Trump, and in fact, in many countries around the world where rightist voices are growing stronger. Was Xi Jinping simply ahead of the curve? There's the long arc of the universe bending towards male heteronormative nativist voices, or are we being too pessimistic here?

Emily Feng (03:17)
Maybe a little bit of both. I mean, he was on to something, right? I think what this tells us, though, is just for whatever reason, leaders are obsessed with identity as a form of security and enforcing identity as a way to ensure national stability. Like, that link is not something that just Xi Jinping has made. It's something the Republican Party now in the U.S. is making. It's what Eastern European leaders have been thinking about for the last couple of years.

So, as I say in the book, this is not a unique project. China. They can't be faulted for caring about having a unified national identity and wanting people to feel like they identify with the China project. Of course, China's just done it in a way that might be a little bit different than, hopefully, what we do in the US or what other countries do.

What I was interested in is how people react to that in China. And I have a lot of admiration. People continue to live their lives, and they're the people they want to be. But of course, it's getting harder and harder. I didn't think when I was writing the book; I started in 2020 when I started thinking about this book. I didn't think when I was writing this book that it might have parallels to the US, but now that it's come out and I was worried it might be a little bit outdated, I am finding eerie parallels to my new base.

David (04:21)
So Emily, you've structured this book in a wonderful way, a very organic way. I assume it was much harder than it seems. It flows very naturally from the different characters that you've interviewed and their plight. To the actual sort of, or I guess I should say, the microcosm that you're dealing with these characters and how it fits into the macrocosm of Chinese governance and policy and so forth. I'm wondering if you could just maybe start by just a general overview of how you did that and how you were thinking of these different identities. Many of which were multiple identities. Everyone has some piece of identity puzzle, male, female, gay, straight, educated and uneducated, different ethnicities and so forth. So, I'm assuming you could have structured it in lots of ways, but this seems to work so naturally. What was your plan as you collated all this information to make a book?

Emily Feng (05:13)
Well, I'm glad you think so. I was worried it would be a little bit too diverse. But for people who haven't read the book yet, the book is organized both thematically and kind of geographically. So it starts out with kind of big concepts of identity. So, people who represent different economic or political visions for the PRC, the country itself. And then it starts to get more concrete. So people

start experiencing controls or discourse that is trying to change how they think about language, ethnicity, culture, gender. And then it gets very, it actually gets into policy. So Hong Kong, Taiwan, and then finally it ends with ethnic Chinese people in the U.S. And so you also go from kind of the heart of urban China on the East Coast to the historic borderlands and then finally to Hong Kong and then.

You leave the PRC, you go to Taiwan, and then you end up in the US, not even in the Asia Pacific. So I'm glad you think that it worked, but honestly, it was out of necessity. It's because I think identity is just so varied that there was no way that I was going to have one character or one narrative carry the entire book. And two, that's actually kind of how I naturally encountered the stories, kind of in that order.

I mean, I had to... shuffle things around a little bit. And as I was writing the book and outlining it, I realized that there were all of these connections between some of the characters and, that some of them actually had met independent of me, and that their stories were starting to intersect as I followed them over the years. And you get that a little bit in the book. But really, I kind of just got lucky. It was the way that the stories came to me as I started first reporting in China and realizing that the story of China and identity was not just on the East Coast.

Jeremiah (06:52)
I did hear one interviewer who referred to the book as part of a trilogy, going back to Philip Pan's Out of Mao's Shadow and then to Evan Osnos' Age of Ambition, and thought of your book as the third part in an age when rather than China reawakening and becoming ambitious is, in fact, turning inward, which I thought was an interesting way to frame your book in a larger conversation.

I was actually, when I was reading it, I was struck more by its connection to some books that were done by Chinese journalists and interviewers. And that is to say, there was an older book that was translated in the nineties based on interviews in the eighties and nineties by a journalist named Sang Ye, which was translated by Geremie Barmé as China Candid. And then a little bit later in the 2000s, there was a translation of interviews by another journalist, say, we'd call him a writer, Liao Yiwu called The Corpse Walker.

And the reason I thought of your book in the context of these two was that while the format is different and the style of how you present the information is different, the approach to taking characters that represent, if it's even possible to represent the broad sweep. of what it means to be China, what it means to be Chinese, and what it means to be living in China at this moment. How did you come across the characters, the people, the subjects that you interviewed or wrote about?

Emily Feng (08:18)
I'm so glad you mentioned The Corpse Walker because that was totally an influence on writing this book. I'm also frankly looking for secondhand copies now of China Candid. And it's flattering that you mentioned, an interviewer mentioned that this book might be part of a trilogy. I think I was the one who might have said that. So if I could flatter myself, I imagine this narratively as part of that arc.

How did I encounter these people? Some of them were people who I had met on the side of bigger events.

So for example, Kenny, this Hong Kong protester who ends up plot spoiler, leaving Hong Kong and trying to get to Taiwan. I had met through someone I'd interviewed just kind of as someone who would give context as part of bigger Hong Kong stories. And I ended up interviewing some other Hong Kong protesters that Kenny fled with, but I never interviewed Kenny himself. And only about a year and a half later, I realized that I also knew his girlfriend, sometimes circles are really small, and that they lived in DC. And I was in DC for a work trip. And so we just started talking and kept in touch that way.

Some other people, I read their stories in Chinese media and I just thought they were so interesting that I reached out to them cold. And that doesn't always work. But as a journalist, you have license to be socially awkward, just email or WhatsApp people or ask for their number. and barge into their lives. And so that's what I did, for example, with the prosecutors. So this woman who works for the Chinese Justice Ministry and then decides to switch sides, so to speak, and become a human rights lawyer. I just found her life story so interesting that I reached out to her because we had some mutual acquaintances. So it was a real hodgepodge of characters.

I wrote this book after I had left China. So I was writing it in a not-so-great headspace. And when I was remembering all of these people and having to winnow down the structure of the book and whose voices I wanted to include in the book, it was actually really nice and kind of therapeutic because I realized I'd met a lot of interesting people and my time in China had been quite wonderful.

David (10:30)
I'd like to delve into one of the characters. There's so many that are so interesting. And there are two or three that I would really like to know a little bit more about. But one is the chapter you call the scooter thief. This hapless everyman named Zhou Liqi who steals electric scooters and gets arrested many times and then ends up becoming a sort of an internet social media star and has a real turbulent back and forth where he's on top and he's on bottom and he's in jail and he's a star and in the end He was not appreciative of your role as someone who was writing his story, right?

Emily Feng (11:09)
Zhou Liqi is this scooter thief. He's born in Guangxi, a province in southern China. He grows up extremely poor, even by Guangxi standards, and his family lives in this mud shack. His parents are farmers. He thinks about going to the big city to labor as a migrant worker, which is what most people do, but he realizes pretty quickly that he can work really hard and really still not earn a good living. And I think I have a line in there. which he said once in one of his short videos, you know, I could never actually afford to buy one of the houses that I would have been hired to build as a construction worker. And so he tries to find get rich quick schemes. And one of those out of desperation is to steal scooters. It's warm down there. A lot of people ride scooters instead of drive cars and he gets caught repeatedly. It turns out he's not actually very good at stealing scooters. And after one of these arrests, he gives a jailhouse interview in which The person asks him, why do you keep doing this when you get caught? Don't you mind being in

prison? And he says something to the effect of, I don't mind being here. I couldn't work another day in my life. Coming to prison is like coming home. And then he gets locked up. And what fascinates me about his story is it covers the spectrum of Chinese society. Here's someone who doesn't have a lot of opportunity, basically doesn't even interact with the internet that much. He goes to prison, this stint around, before smartphones even become a a widely available thing in China.

So he doesn't have access to the world wide web when he's in prison and he comes out and all of sudden the world has changed. Everyone has a smartphone. Everyone's on the internet. In fact, he's on the internet even though he doesn't even use it and he's become this internet star who represents being a slacker, rebelling against the work hard culture of China. and becomes kind of this folk hero of a growing movement in China where people feel, I could work as hard as my parents did, but it's not going to get me the better life that it did for them, which I think we see the sentiment panning out even more and more in China.

So my chapter on him profiles this choice he has to make. Does he embrace his internet stardom, or does he stay true to his rebel roots? He eventually tries to embrace his newfound fame, but it doesn't quite work out because although he tries to be a good person and promote this positive image that the local government wants him to do, he never can quite leave behind his legacy as a scooter thief. The reason why he became famous in the first place ends up also becoming the story about China's internet controls and what kind of content they want to proliferate.

Jeremiah (13:44)
I was wondering, Emily, if it would be possible for you to share a little bit of one of your chapters with us, just to give our listeners a sense of the wonderful writing in the book.

Emily Feng (13:57)
I was thinking about this scene because I'm fascinated by this character, Youssef, who's a Hui Muslim in the book, and it's his chapter that gives the book its title. But the scene happens in Saudi Arabia, is that okay? It's when he does his hajj.

Jeremiah (14:11)
That's fine, that's great.

Emily Feng (14:13)
Okay, so this is about Yusuf. It's one of his first times out of China and he's going to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and he has this epiphany among many in the chapter.

The negotiation of identities between Islam and China was on Yusuf's mind as he boarded the plane from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia to complete the Hajj. Most of the other passengers were also on their first ever hajj and they were so excited they spent most of the trip standing in the aisles and shouting their praise for Allah. The next day, his heart pounding, Yusuf walked into the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca where a seething mass of humanity was already orbiting the Kaaba, a massive, intricately inscribed, black, stone cube that Muslims consider their holiest site. Yusuf felt the edges of his individual blurring as he joined the thousands of other pilgrims encircling the Kaaba. The whirlpool of humanity brought him closer and closer to the holy artifact. On his

fifth circumambulation, a Saudi Arabian guard spotted Yusuf and extended a hand, shouting welcome to his, quote, brothers from China, hoisting him close enough to the Kaaba so he can nearly graze the base of the cube with his fingertips.

For the next 24 days, Yusuf virtually lived in the masjid rather than waste time walking the one hour each way back to his hotel each day. When he grew tired, he found an empty patch of carpet and went to sleep, the silent silhouette of the Kaaba keeping him company. Never had he felt so connected to the broader Islamic ummah or community, nor had he ever felt so unquestionably accepted as part of the Chinese community. Yusuf was penniless after buying his round-trip tickets to Mecca, so for food, he relied on the charity of other Chinese pilgrims, who had the foresight to bring their own pots and kettles and electric stoves to prepare Chinese cuisine.

Yusuf returned to China brimming with new inspiration. He would convince the rest of China that Islam was intrinsic to Chinese culture and that being religious and being Chinese were not only perfectly compatible, but one and the same.

Jeremiah (16:14)
That's great, Emily. Thank you for sharing that. I was intrigued by the through lines in your book that show how the legacies particularly the Qing Empire, they still have the power to unsettle. the question of what is China? What does it mean to be Chinese? Insofar as there is an incredible diversity within what we call the Han Chinese community. But of course, when we're thinking of a place as vast as China, we're also talking about places like Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, places whose inclusion in our modern China, are based largely on their incorporation into the earlier Qing Empire. And this sets up this real tension between what it means to be Qing, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual empire ruled by the Manchus and the PRC, which today is anti-imperialist, ruled mostly by Han and one that increasingly defines Chineseness through Han cultural values. And as David, of course, has written quite a bit about language.

And I was wondering, What are some of the areas as you're exploring this notion, this really powerful notion of identity, what are some notions where you really felt history bleeding through into the present-day conversations you were having,

Emily Feng (17:33)
Oof, that's a good question. And you're so right to point out that tension because you have both essentially a modern-day ethno-nationalist state, but at the same time one that's nationalist, harkening back to borders that date to the empire when it was a multi-ethnic state. And that tension. I thought was embodied really well in Yusuf. He's a guy who starts out thinking of himself as basically a Chinese nationalist. His ancestors fought for the Chinese Communist Revolution. He speaks basically only Mandarin Chinese. He learns Arabic and a little bit of English later on as he starts traveling more. He sees himself first and foremost as... Chinese, but he also traces his Hui Muslim ancestry back to Tang dynasty traders who came to Northwestern China. So he's very, very proud of that history with migration and empire.

So I felt that there, and that's why I always love traveling the most to places like Gansu and Ningxia in China, because you're... on the edges of Empire. You can still really feel it and see it.

I mean, the great thing about China is everything changes at such a rapid clip and at such a scale when things change that you feel like you are constantly watching history being made.

So one character we haven't talked about yet is Emma. I call her by her English name. And she's from a mining city in Inner Mongolia that sees this huge real estate boom. And so in just one city, all of the big economic trends that I used to study and read about were playing out right in front of me. And here was this woman whose life had been dictated by these changes. Unfortunately, her family, her father in particular, gets targeted in the anti-corruption campaign. And so she has to become essentially a petitioner for him. But her life... just became kind of this through line where I felt like all of these economic stories that I'd followed over the last five, six years came into one person and unfortunately one family.

So maybe not history, but... I always had this sense of surrealness when I would read the news, read what other people had reported, and then encounter people whose lives very much represented exactly what China was going through.

David (19:47)
You're dealing with these people who are in various stages of oppression or tension or uncertainty because of new policies, because of their identity, of course. And in some cases, I suppose they would be viewed as a kind of guardian angel who might be able to solve their problems by voicing them to the outside world or to the press. While other people might be afraid of you because of what you represent, something, possible threat of the government's not going to want them to be spilling the beans about all these aspects of their life. I know there must be many, many different versions of this all over the map, depending on the person and how the outcome came about. it's their lives that you're dealing with, but also the lives of the people they represent, which is also important.

Emily Feng (20:32)
I am always amazed that people want to be interviewed by journalists about themselves because it is an extractive process and people can be astonishingly open about their personal lives and what they've been through. Often you're reaching out to people because they've just gone through the worst experience of their life. That's unfortunately how news and journalism works. I think a lot of people wanted to speak because they felt like they didn't have a platform to record their stories otherwise. Literally and figuratively in my case, because I would often record them as we talked over the phone or in person. They felt like people just didn't really care, so they were flattered that someone wanted to spend hours with them and hear their story. Some people who had already left China and had been through a really harrowing process to do that and were telling the stories to me after the fact, I think found it... I'm hoping found it therapeutic, found it nice just to be able to recount these stories now while they were in full control. And so I, yeah, I didn't find it difficult talking to people. I think mostly people wanted to make sure that other people remembered their stories and heard them. And in fact, the Hui Muslim chapter, the two characters who are kind of the main, the main characters in that story, they're writers and publishers themselves. And they had spent years trying to get their story out there and trying to get their essays out there and having them basically be censored. Their publishing rights yanked in mainland China and in Hong Kong. So they wanted to create a public record and this was one way that they were doing it.

Jeremiah (22:03)
Emily, I know you left China in 2022 and it was a time when a lot of other journalists were leaving not always of their own volition and often the the departures were orchestrated in bureaucratic ways so that there's some kind of plausible deniability that we didn't throw them out. We just didn't get the right form in in time that kind of thing. But the result was the same.

Emily Feng (22:26)
That's a good way of putting it. There was a bunch of technicalities that officials cited about why I wasn't able to go back, but it ended up being basically a paperwork issue. There wasn't an issue, to be clear. It was manufactured. But I found out when... I was at my parents' house. I was actually trying to get on a flight to Shanghai. And at that time, this was August 2022. It was still during China's zero COVID policies. So it had been really hard to get this flight. It was extraordinarily expensive. I'd arranged all of these blood antibody tests and nasal swabs ahead of time and I had arranged a quarantine in Shanghai and all of that and all of a sudden the foreign ministry in China just had ghosted me. So we were reaching out through diplomatic channels to Chinese diplomats in the US and in Beijing and I just had this feeling of kind of I think this is common in in times of emergency, kind of an out of body disbelief at what was happening, because I'd thought about this moment for a really long time.

It's actually one of the reasons why I started thinking about the book in 2019, because I already had a sense then that China was closing down in a way that would impact foreign journalists quite directly. And I was... trying to think of ways to maintain a connection to a country that I really cared about and a story that I really wanted to continue reporting on even if I couldn't be in the country itself. So after having thought about and harped on this anxiety of mine for years and years to have it actually happen was very, very weird. And I wasn't very sad or stressed about it at first. I think a lot of that came in the six to 12 months afterwards when you really had to kind of pick up the pieces and make something of it.

I eventually moved to Taiwan, which was wonderful looking back, but it was also a difficult period because you were trying to mesh these two parts of your life together. I still was covering China. It wasn't like I moved on to a new beat just because I moved to a new place. So constantly thinking about basically everything that I was missing in a very new place. I think a lot of people move to Taiwan now thinking I'll be based there and report on China because they speak Mandarin Chinese and so many people came from China to Taiwan over the centuries, including hundreds of thousands in just the last century. So seems like a natural fit. And actually, there's basically no interaction between Taiwan and the PRC these days. So I found Taiwan a kind of foreign place at first. And I was navigating that and thinking very much about the old world that I left behind.

David (24:45)
This may be too large of a question to answer concisely, but we think of reporters like you who are doing Yeoman's work, which is really bringing to light some of the plight of these people. as a direct or indirect result of government policies or government obsessions. But were there moments when you were going back and forth dealing with these people's problems and looking at the larger social issues that were involved, were there ever points where you began to actually get a little bit more of what some people would call cognitive empathy for the government itself?

mean, very often some of these rights infractions and things actually have a lot to do with a very complex social problem that the government has to deal with in a way that will maintain stability and cause the least harm. Is there any example you can think of or a feeling where you actually begin to get a little empathy for the problems of governing China and some of these people are just the victims of that conundrum that they're facing?

Emily Feng (25:46)
I think you see that in the case with Emma. So she's the daughter of these really rich entrepreneurs in Inner Mongolia. And she describes herself as a little pink, a xiao fenhong like someone who grows up extremely patriotic to the point where she will be quite aggressive if she hears criticism of China. And she ends up living in the US for a number of years and almost qualifies for a green card. But she hears all about the anti-corruption stuff and thinks... These are real issues. Corruption is a real issue in China. And going after things like hidden shadow debt and corporate debt is a real issue. And overbuilding unnecessary buildings in China is a real issue. And so she's quite sympathetic to all of these various policy campaigns under Xi and decides she wants to go back and contribute to that project and not stay in the U.S. And what she still objects to this day is just how her case has been, her individual case has been handled. but that the overall trend and intention is not mistaken. even in her appeals, she would say things like, you know, the center, the central government started this great project. It's local government officials who have been corrupt and have been led astray and are implementing this badly. And that was a really, really common refrain I kept hearing. know, if only Beijing, the leaders in Beijing knew what was happening, they would fix this because the central government is good and wise. but it's just been so kind of implemented badly on the ground.

Jeremiah (27:10)
Thank you so much, Emily, for taking the time to come on the show. I really appreciate it. You're based now in Washington, D.C. What's the future hold? What are you going to be doing with NPR? And is there another book project?

Emily Feng (27:24)
What is my future with NPR? What is the future of NPR in this political landscape? I mean, that's another question. But I've been brought back at first, to cover US-China, China foreign policy stuff from DC. With all of the news happening, I also am now covering more of the federal restructuring effort and the international ripple effects that's been having over the last couple of months. And I...

David (27:29)
right.

Emily Feng (27:47)
still really miss Asia. So I'm hoping to be able to meld what's going on here and then look at what that looks like on the ground on the other side of the world, hopefully in the next coming years. But yeah, I think a lot of things are uncertain, including the future of NPR right now and the future of journalism writ large as we've known it over the last decades in the United States. As to future book projects, Yeah, I'm always thinking about them. You know, you mentioned I was in Middle East before this and I just completely fell in love with the Levant, Syria, Lebanon

and the stories there. I think it would be enormously hubristic for me to consider a book project there given that's not my background and I don't speak a lick of Arabic, but it's really captured my imagination. I love telling long form stories, are books the best or maybe the only way to do that these days. You know, a best-selling book these days sells tens of thousands of copies maybe. It's not a lot. But I loved writing. I loved writing the book, so selfishly it was a fun project.

Jeremiah (28:41)
Well, the book is called Let Only Red Flowers Bloom, Identity and Belonging in Xi Jinping's China. It's out this month wherever you can buy great books. Thank you, Emily, for joining us and thank you, David, for joining us from Beijing.

Emily Feng (28:56)
Thank you for staying up late, David.

David (28:56)
My pleasure.

Jeremiah (28:59)
And thank you all for listening to Barbarians at the Gate. You can find us wherever you get your podcasts for free. And a quick note to support NPR, buy tote bags, people. Lots and lots of tote bags. And on that note, we shall cue the drums.