

James Evans: Welcome to the Harvard On China Podcast. I'm James Evans at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. Speaking with me today is Carroll Bogert, a graduate of Harvard College, class of '83, and Harvard's Regional Studies East Asia Master's Degree class of '86 where she was supervised by the late professor, Roderick MacFarquhar. As a journalist and human rights advocate, she's worked with a range of organizations including as deputy executive director at Human Rights Watch and current president of The Marshall Project. She previously spent 12 years as a foreign correspondent for Newsweek in China, Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union, covering events from Tiananmen Square to an attempted coup to oust Gorbachev. Most recently, she was honored as the recipient of the 2019 Centennial Medal Citation from Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

James Evans: Carroll Bogert, welcome to the Harvard On China Podcast.

Carroll Bogert: Thank you for having me.

James Evans: And so you were at Harvard College and then at Harvard's Regional Studies East Asia program; what initially made you interested in China as a student?

Carroll Bogert: I came to it fairly randomly. I came of age as Khomeini came to power in Iran, and I arrived at Harvard as a brightly scrubbed young freshman, determined to study Farsi. But Harvard only taught Farsi every other year, and it just wasn't my year. I had an aunt and uncle that had been in the Foreign Service, and I told them that I was determined instead to study Arabic, and she said, "Oh God, don't do that. You're a woman and you just won't get anywhere with Arabic in the Middle East. You should study Chinese."

Carroll Bogert: And it was a time, of course, when diplomatic recognition was switching from Taiwan to China. Deng Xiaoping had just come to power and China was just beginning the process of opening. So it was a very serendipitous moment historically that happened to dovetail with my coming of age at college.

James Evans: While you were here at Harvard, some quite big events happened, I hear. So, for example, Jiang Zemin came to visit Harvard. What was that visit like?

Carroll Bogert: So I was here for that event, which I remember as being extremely surreal, as I think most visits by heads of state are. They're highly controlled, highly choreographed. They were, of course, very concerned that there not be a great deal of protest or trouble, which was entirely possible on a university campus. So I was one of a sea of reporters in Mem Hall listening to the event.

James Evans: Was there any controversy on campus around it as well? I know, for example, we have files here at the Fairbanks Center written by then director Ezra Vogel, trying to explain why Jiang Zemin was coming to Harvard.

Carroll Bogert: I don't remember that there was a huge outpouring of protest at the university, to be honest. It wasn't really a period of great unrest on university campuses, they were still fairly quiescent.

James Evans: The post '60s slump.

Carroll Bogert: There was a bit of a slump. I mean, when I was in college there was some protest around divestment of the university's endowment from South Africa. That was a minor blip, but otherwise the 1980s were a very somnolent time, and a very greedy time. The Reagan era was not a time of great movement on campus, or really the '90s. I would say after Tiananmen, of course, there came to be more public protest in the United States over the most favored nation status for China, and one did see a bit more unrest.

James Evans: In China, in particular in the '80s, you have this sort of unique decade almost of post opening up and reform, but pre Tiananmen, in which things seemed to be opening up. We have a number of our faculty, for example, who were all in China during the '80s who said it was a really unusual time. And especially one of our coworkers here, Holly Angel, lived in Chengdu during that time, she said it was sort of this amazing experience of being in a city that felt like it was really flourishing. Was that your experience in China as well?

Carroll Bogert: Yes. The dark side of China was of course always present and one felt that many people were afraid to be too close to foreigners. That was still slightly dangerous. Those who did were mostly kind of artists and creative types who were more eager to defy authority. But overall there was a sense that the society was moving in the right direction. Later I went on to cover the Soviet Union, which was a place where everybody felt that everything was getting worse all the time, and it just couldn't have been a more dramatic contrast to the mood, what it was like to cover not only China but all of Asia at that time, which was just growing in wealth and developing in ways that generally made the population happy. I would say it was a very hopeful time in China. I mean, I lived there in the time of Hu Yaobang, who really did allow a fair degree of intellectual flourishing and creative ferment and that felt very exciting.

Carroll Bogert: But as we saw later, of course Hu Yaobang's death sparked the Tiananmen protests, so we saw later how profound were the fissures within the Chinese leadership. That the leadership took great pains, in fact, to cover them up. So it was the job of journalists to try to figure out where they lay. We all felt that Chen Yun was the big enemy of progress. Of course, later I discovered that a phrase that I have always quoted Deng Xiaoping as saying, that we must feel stones as we cross the river, was in fact something that Chen Yun said. He was a progressive person in his own way. Every era of Communist Party observant needs its own sense of who the enemies are and who the good guys are. We're more or less right or more or less wrong as history later proves.

James Evans: I can hear several undergrads at the moment crossing out that quote by Deng Xiaoping and rewriting Chen Yun very hurriedly as they hear this podcast.

Carroll Bogert: I was horrified to discover that. I'd been giving speeches for years in which I used that phrase completely wrong.

James Evans: You became a journalist straight out of Harvard. Who did you initially start writing for and was it straight away a China job?

Carroll Bogert: It was a tabula rasa time for journalism in China. The first foreign correspondents had been allowed to come in in any kind of numbers only around, I think, 1980 and actually reside in Beijing and be credentialed by the foreign ministry. I wasn't able to do that because I wasn't formally anybody's correspondent. I was a kid with no journalism experience at all, but a Harvard MA. And I went first to Hong Kong and I had cards printed up. Of course, you're nobody without a business card. And I didn't have anything to put on my card. I didn't have an address in China, I didn't have a phone number. I had a name and I had "Hafao Daxue Moshi", Harvard University MA. That was all that there was on my card. But that actually proved to be enough because even in China, which had been so closed for so long, there were a lot of people who knew about "Hafo" and it opened a lot of doors.

Carroll Bogert: I had a difficult time living, just simply existing in China, because the foreign ministry of course in its credentialing process also assigned housing to foreign correspondents. And because I didn't have a credential, I didn't have housing, so I was kind of a bag lady around the Jianguomenwai compound and lived in the empty apartments of one or another diplomat or journalist for two years and left the country every few months to go to Hong Kong to renew my tourist visa. So I was living on the wrong side of the law, but they didn't seem to care too much. I mean, I did it, but it was a rather precarious existence and it meant that I couldn't go to any foreign ministry briefings or other official events, which of course feels like a tragedy when it's happening to you, but it was actually a tremendous boon because it meant that I had to cover everything that official China wasn't saying or talking about and I was more the stringer of the streets.

Carroll Bogert: I wrote letters to all the Bureau chiefs in Beijing and I said, "I'm coming to live in China audaciously and I speak Chinese, so I'd like to be your eyes and ears and your gopher." And a couple of them wrote back and I ended up working for the Washington Post as a gopher. I have to say that my job wouldn't have existed if there had been anything like the technology that we have today because the correspondent, Dan Sutherland, a really brilliant journalist, tapped out his stories on his portable typewriter that he had carried with him to cover the Vietnam war and then handed the pages to me and I sat at the telex machine and made telex tape, which I think is a technology that doesn't really even exist anymore. So if there had been a computer, I would have been out of a job.

James Evans: So a different era of journalism.

Carroll Bogert: Yeah, a different era of journalism. I mean, very, very rudimentary, but very productive. And a kid who had no journalism experience but could speak

Chinese could parlay that skill into a career in journalism, which was, as I say, kind of hubristic, but it panned out.

James Evans: There's something to be said for the tenacity that comes with that mentality of just being like, "I'm here. Would you like to hire me?" I'm sure there are a lot of journalist students nowadays who can sort of sympathize with that approach.

Carroll Bogert: I guess. I don't think there are still places on the globe that are very uncovered. Not many of them are as important as China. I mean it was a bit of a unique thing, this huge country with a billion people in it that had almost no journalists from the West. I have a hard time now advising young journalists about how they should make their way in the world because the traditional career path of course for a journalist is to join the staff of a small regional newspaper in the United States and work hard until you can get picked up by the Washington Post in their Metro section and then get to the national section and then to the international section and get sent abroad as a foreign correspondent when you're about 40 or 45. That was the path when I was young and I circumvented all of that by just going straight abroad myself, which as I say, was audacious, but because it was such a weird idea there weren't other people doing it and it made me a kind of unique property in Beijing.

Carroll Bogert: I don't know whether that's wise advice. The young people that I see going into journalism today throw themselves into places like Syria where there aren't many correspondents because there shouldn't be any correspondents there, it's far too dangerous. And one does worry about that, where the spirit of adventurousness would take the young journalist today.

James Evans: Pursuing risk but in a sort of reckless way almost.

Carroll Bogert: The risks that others eschew because it should be.

James Evans: You've had a very varied career and you started life, post college, obviously, as a journalists, but then you've moved into human rights, criminal justice; what led your decision to move away from journalism and into these other fields?

Carroll Bogert: I was eventually picked up by Newsweek magazine and sent then to their Southeast Asia Bureau. And then I think they had the idea that I had lived in one big awful communist country, so they would send me to the other, because I really had no background in the Soviet Union whatsoever. They sent me back to Harvard to study Russian before I went. That was already a veering of the career out of the China field. But yes, it put me squarely in journalism. At a certain point I was married and I was starting to have children and I felt that I had better come back to live in the United States or I might never do so. And once here I found that the field of journalism was not about the spirit of adventure and discovery and learning things that weren't known yet and trying to explain them to people back in the West, but it was really about proximity to power and

did you play tennis with somebody on the National Security Council? I just wasn't interested in that.

Carroll Bogert: So I left to join Human Rights Watch, partly because I felt they were doing a very good job of covering the world and actually knowing what was going on. I was at an event of the Council on Foreign Relations with Hun Sen and nobody was really very prepared to ask questions of Hun Sen.

James Evans: Hun Senof-

Carroll Bogert: Of Cambodia. This very nice lunch on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. I knew basically about a little bit of the history of Cambodia, but not really very much. And in the question and answer period, nobody was pinning this murderous dictator to the wall in the way that we should have, until a woman stood up from Human Rights Watch and said, "On," whatever it was, "July 8th, 1995 police shot at unarmed strikers in the center of city X in Cambodia. You promised an investigation, but the commission to investigate has still not issued its report these many years later. What do you say about that?" I mean, she had every fact at her command and that's what a good journalist should be doing. And I saw that that's what actually Human Rights Watch was doing.

Carroll Bogert: So I came to human rights work with a passion for the ways in which information, good information, solid, accurate information and information that's hard to get because it may come from faraway places can be deployed for good.

James Evans: You've also done human rights work with China and it's been a touchy point in China for a long time. A lot of people will say, "Oh well, human rights are not applicable to China because it's out of a Western individualist discourse that comes out of the enlightenment. China has a different approach to how society should be structured." How do you respond to people who try and comment on those who do human rights work in China in that way?

Carroll Bogert: Well, the analog is, yeah, antibiotics were discovered in the West too, but they work for everybody. And of course there were Chinese scholars who participated in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and there's a reason that it's called universal. And there are moreover many brave Chinese human rights activists who would contest vigorously the idea that human rights don't apply to China. So I think the best answer to that is always those who are pursuing that struggle domestically, all of the really brave people that I met doing human rights work were the people who worked for local organizations. When you work for Human Rights Watch, you're so protected. We did worry about the security of our staff, of course, and people did occasionally get into trouble, but we didn't ever lose anybody and people weren't murdered, knock wood. And of course there are many people ... and not only violence of that nature or necessarily arrests, but also ostracism and isolation and many things that make life very unbearable. There are a number of

extraordinary Chinese human rights activists who I think are the best argument for why the struggle is not a Western imposition, but a universal aspiration.

James Evans: The space for human rights work has been constricted considerably, it appears, since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013 with a tightening grip on society and government control. What is the space for human rights in China today?

Carroll Bogert: Well, I think as you say, it's in some ways a very constricted one. In other ways, I would say compared to the era in which I lived in China, the lexicon has changed. There are certainly rights efforts, whether it's a struggle for women's rights or for labor rights, which may be clipped around the margins, but there's still much greater room for maneuver than there would have been back in the day. And so I don't want to buy into the Pollyannish narrative that as China develops, really all things get better, because I think Xi Jinping kind of puts a period at the end of that sentence. But there's a much greater degree of personal freedom, obviously, and Chinese society has grown so much more complex that there are certain dynamics that are unshelchable.

Carroll Bogert: Look, it's not just in China, but it's looking at historical developments all over the world at the moment that we begin to question whether the general assumption of history as a line of progress moving inexorably towards a brighter future is really a sustainable myth. And if ever there was a country that demonstrated open, closed, forward, back, it's China.

James Evans: I think it's been very interesting to a lot of observers, particularly when Xi Jinping came to power and so many people predicted that he would be the great reformer and things would change compared to the Hu Jintao era and we've clearly seen that's not the case.

Carroll Bogert: Well, the new guy is always ... I mean, I remember when Andropov came to power in the Soviet Union, everybody said, "He listens to jazz." Yeah, but he was the head of the KGB.

James Evans: Which I guess in hindsight, we all know Andropov did not turn out to be ...

Carroll Bogert: Well actually he was the guy who chose Gorbachev, so he did play his role in history. But part of the problem is trying to divine the personalities that people within extremely closed systems. And we operate with such a tiny, tiny amount of knowledge about things that we really need to know about. And I've thought about this frequently because I did Tiananmen Square and I did cover the fall of the Soviet Union and why did those two protests movements end in such different ways? And I think while the importance of mass protest and demonstration cannot be understated, that's obviously what created and what was Tiananmen, there's also a way in which the resolution of those issues often shrinks down to a tiny group of people around the Supreme Leader who influence him, and it's always a him, to take one decision or another. So think about what it feels like to be Deng Xiaoping, or whoever was actually in charge

at the time of Tiananmen, but they're afraid and they're consulting a very few trustees, as Gorbachev did as well. But they had different people around them. What actually drives history is both mass movement and at the end a very, very tiny group about whom we know often very little.

James Evans: Just recently we've had a case where people were trying to count how many times Xi Jinping appeared on front pages of People's Daily as some sort of metric of whether or not he was still in favor, and somebody on Twitter pointed out, "If this is the metric by which we are trying to measure Chinese elite politics, we really know nothing about what's going on."

Carroll Bogert: Yes, we know nothing. And mapping those personal relationships and understanding who has a personal connection to whom turns out to be very important. I also covered the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 and at the end of the day it was a phone call from Ronald Reagan that persuaded him to flee the country and allow some form of democratic government to be installed. This circle of influence over big historical events is often very tiny and very closed.

James Evans: Is history decisions by individuals or big changes over time? Because if it is just by a small group of individuals, it almost takes the agency of everybody else to make decisions.

Carroll Bogert: It does, but everybody else is what brings the leader to the point of having to make the decision. So it's both, but this is what Tolstoy wrote War and Peace about, we could spend a lot of time talking about this.

James Evans: Building on my question about contemporary China and human rights work there, your own career has sort of moved away from human rights in China towards more criminal justice in the United States itself. How does the current state of US politics, and in particular the Trump administration's perceived attitude towards women and minorities, how does that affect the United States' moral standing when it comes to telling other countries about human rights?

Carroll Bogert: I mean the Trump administration has sort of turbocharged this issue, but it's been an issue for an awfully long time. I was once accused by a colleague at Human Rights Watch of having a fundamentally benign view of the United States because my career internationally had been in China and the Soviet Union where the United States was more or less on the right side of history. Whereas my colleague had spent his formative years in Latin America where the United States was definitively on the wrong side of history, or of the human rights cause. To say the least, the spotty record of the United States on human rights has always undercut its own voice in international fora for that cause. I'm careful about talking about this because that argument I think taken too far is an excuse for defeatism on the part of American diplomats who cover their head and say, "Well we can't do anything about human rights because we have Trump as President, so we're not going to try."

Carroll Bogert: And I think the best and really only argument that can be made by any country is, "My country absolutely has human rights issues as well. I recognize them and admit them and vow to work on them. And I want to talk to you about doing the same." To lecture other nations from a position of one's own ultimate virtue is a losing battle. Having said that, I do think that the ability of the United States to lead and articulate a human rights cause internationally is weaker than it has been at any time in my lifetime. And I think the presidency of George W. Bush was also a body blow and the Iraq war, Abu Ghraib. The open use of torture and defense of the use of torture by the American government was a shock.

Carroll Bogert: I would say, in case your listeners haven't clocked it, that the US actually stepped back from that brink, that we did manage to reestablish the norm, preventing torture. That was the result of a lot of hard work by a lot of people in the human rights movement and the legal profession. And if you look, Trump talks about wanting to take the gloves off and torture people, but the Pentagon and the CIA are having none of it. There is, I think, a way to bring US behavior back and better aligned with international human rights standards, but I think we also have to recognize that we have an appalling history. We're a country that was born in genocide against indigenous people with hundreds of years of slavery. We are undoubtedly one of the worst perpetrators of one of the greatest crimes against humanity in modern history. And we continue to tolerate a human rights crisis of great proportions with the largest prison population per capita in the world. One can only approach human rights advocacy with a modicum of modesty.

James Evans: And so what made your decision to shift from talking about China's human rights space to talking more about the United States'? Is it because of geographical proximity, you now live in the United States and that sort of practically helps?

Carroll Bogert: In a way. I mean I am an American and I would not want to pass through my career without working on the biggest human rights issue in my country, which is the criminal justice system. I had a colleague when I was studying China here who said, "Of course you realize that the reason we study China is because the guilt that we feel over the oppression of blacks in America." And I remember being very taken aback and saying, "No, actually I hadn't realized that. Let me think about that a little bit more." There's something to it.

James Evans: You're currently at the Marshall Project, on which perhaps you can tell the listeners what that is about that. But you recently wrote an article for the Marshall Project that had the beautiful image of the new memorial to lynching that's just been erected in Alabama. Beautiful design, but incredibly harrowing. And for those who haven't seen it, it's essentially hanging slabs from the ceiling and it sort of creates this incredible space.

Carroll Bogert: I actually went back for a second trip to the lynching memorial just this past weekend, being I guess a glutton for punishment. The idea behind the Marshall Project is really that no big social problem ever got solved without somebody

shining a bright light on it. And although there were many organizations doing advocacy on criminal justice like the ACLU or even Human Rights Watch, there wasn't an organization that did nothing but produce high quality journalism about it and investigative journalism that really dug into what the problems are.

Carroll Bogert: It's a difficult system to cover because by definition it's kind of locked away. I mean it's more than two million people behind bars and nobody really knows what's going on inside prisons in America because it's very hard to get in and there are no cameras allowed there, or in courtrooms. It's hard to shine a light there. So we are only four years old and we are a newsroom that is producing journalism on a daily basis, co-publishing it with other media organizations and trying to get more people to care about the criminal justice system and trying to put good information into the public domain so that the advocates and the policymakers are pursuing policies that are going to work. So I see it in some ways as a continuation of what I've been doing my whole life, which is, again, it's about the production of information and it's about using that information to try to make some change.

James Evans: And if our listeners would like to support the Marshall Project, is there a way they can do that?

Carroll Bogert: They certainly could. They could go straight to the website, [www.themarshallproject.org](http://www.themarshallproject.org) and click the donate button.

James Evans: So we do two pieces on our podcast, which are questions that we try and ask everybody. Our first question is called field trip, which is supposed to be a literal trip for your field about how it has changed, but also advice for people who are coming into the field new. In your case, how have approaches to human rights in China changed, very briefly, and what advice would you give to those trying to enter the field of human rights work in China?

Carroll Bogert: Human rights work has never been easy in China, so I don't want to suggest ... because I look at it from a perspective of the mid 1980s when there was no human rights activism and even Human Rights Watch didn't have a China researcher at the time. I think the really life altering decision that has to be made by China specialists about going into human rights work is are you prepared to be banned from the country that you love? And this is sort of a devastating choice or occurrence that has happened to many people whom I know and it changes your life, it changes what you can do in your career, and that makes it a very serious step indeed.

James Evans: Our final piece is a quick fire round that is sort of famously known as the world's slowest quick fire round. It's called the Fairbank Five and we have five quick questions about China to give our listeners a sense of what really gripped your interest about the country. So our first question is, what is your favorite Chinese food?

Carroll Bogert: Ganbian Siji Dou. String beans ... what is ganbian siji dou? I don't know, it's like a magical string bean dish. I don't know how they make it. Something string beanie and so pungent and wonderful and yeah, it's the best. You don't always see it on the menu, you have to ask, but every good Chinese restaurant can make it. It is a Szechuan, it's spicy, it's all spicy, yeah.

James Evans: Your favorite place in China?

Carroll Bogert: Well there's always that awkward thing of one's favorite place in China possibly not really being China. I mean Tianshi or the mountains of Xinjiang are just unbelievably, unbelievably beautiful. And of course I know them from both sides, having also lived in the Soviet Union. It's sort of a miraculous part of the world, and Southwest China as well. Again, minority regions which are extraordinary, I think.

James Evans: Your favorite Chinese saying.

Carroll Bogert: Well the ones that I really love are of course the swear words, which one can't really repeat on your podcast, can one? But the idea of "Bie jiang sunzi", "Don't pretend to be a grandson," is just one of the all time great put downs.

James Evans: A book that you have read recently on China that you would recommend to our listeners?

Carroll Bogert: Oh, well of course Evan Osnos' book *The Age Of Ambition*, but I'm cheating because he's my cousin.

James Evans: Oh really? Oh, I didn't know that.

Carroll Bogert: But it's a fantastic book, it really is.

James Evans: And our final question is a class that you took on China that really changed your thinking about the country?

Carroll Bogert: Well, I regret, you youngsters out there, eager beaver historians and social activists, if you are, that I didn't study more art. And I did take one art class at Harvard, which I remember to this day, obviously because I'm talking about it, it's the only art class I've ever taken in my life, foolishly. Then years later I was at Dunhuang and I walked into one of the caves and one of the two bodhisattvas on either side of the Buddha was missing and I looked at the other one and I said, "Oh." It was literally like seeing the face of a friend. And then I realized it was because the missing one was in the Fogg.

James Evans: In the Harvard Art Museum?

Carroll Bogert: I had studied it. Well, I shouldn't say it was ... I can remember it was in the Fogg, but I know that I had studied it in that class. And that was a bit of a rude shock.

That class has stuck with me because it was sort of a unique piece of knowledge in my brain. The many wonderful classes I took with Rod MacFarquhar or Phil Kuhn or others were terrific. But the one that stood out, I suppose because it was different, was really about art. So I think it's important to do things that are not in the mainstream of your study, to really diversify and balance out the things that you learn about a country or culture.

James Evans: So a good call for a liberal arts education.

Carroll Bogert: There you go.

James Evans: Thank you so much for being with us today.

Carroll Bogert: Thank you for having me, James.

James Evans: Don't forget to subscribe to the Harvard On China podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, Podbean, or wherever you get your RSS feed.