

A New Angle

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Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey folks, welcome back, and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is Rowena He, associate professor of history at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and currently a fellow at the National Humanities Center. She's an expert on contemporary Chinese history and the deadly 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

Rowena He: It's one of the most taboo subjects in China today. The Tiananmen mothers are still not allowed to openly mourn their children and schools does not teach it.

Justin Angle: Professor He's writing and commentary appear regularly in the popular press, and she will be joining the University of Montana community on April 13th as part of the President's lecture series. Professor He, thanks for coming on the show today.

Rowena He: Yeah, thank you for having me, Justin.

Justin Angle: So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Rowena He: I was born in China, and actually during the Cultural Revolution, during Mao's Cultural Revolution, my father is a physician, a medical doctor, and my mom is an opera singer. But during those days, it really doesn't matter what you did and who you were. They were just sent to the rural area in the mountain areas. But actually, I grew up with my grandmother in the city where my parents were sent away in the mountains.

Justin Angle: Yeah. So, for some, a listener not familiar with China, describe your childhood. You said you grew up with your grandmother in the city. How large of a city? What was kind of the cultural moment that you were raised in?

Rowena He: I grew up in Canton, not far away from Hong Kong. That's why I speak Cantonese. But my school education is in Mandarin. In those days, it's not unusual for kids to have parents being sent away because of Mao's Cultural Revolution. And I'm not a psychiatrist or psychologist, but I think that kind of upbringing collectively for that generation would definitely have some impact for the society as well.

Justin Angle: And so, describe your path into an academic career in your graduate studies at the University of Toronto. How did you decide to become a scholar?

Rowena He: The year 1989, I think, changed my life and a life changer for so many of those in my generation. You know, in spring 1989, millions of Chinese took to the streets calling for political reform and did peaceful demonstrations across the country, not just Tiananmen Square. I think that's what the general public's impression was. And it was ending on June 4th with the People's Liberation Army firing unarmed civilians under the gaze of the entire world. Over 200,000 Army soldiers were deployed, equipped with AK 47 and tanks. I was in Gwangju at that time, far away from Beijing, but because we were still able to access Hong Kong TV, we were able to watch what was happening in the capital city of Beijing. And I think that changed my life. And as I mentioned earlier, the lives of many of those in my generation. I mean, I was born in Mao's Cultural Revolution and grew up in Deng Xiaoping's reform era. We were told that our country was opening up and having reforms, and we had these ideals about having a better future. We were told that it's our responsibility to sacrifice for a better China, for the people, for the nation. And we saw that as our historical mission. And when we took to the street doing exactly what we were taught, we were punished by that very system that instilled those values. And for the exiles, they were abandoned by the land that they sacrificed himself for. I left China to get back to your question, I was very successful in the business world in the 1990s after Tiananmen, when Deng Xiaoping had this policy. You know, you can make money any way you want as long as you don't talk about politics and don't touch politics. I just like everyone else I was a wife, and I was very successful in the financial field. But that morning of the massacre, to have my peers being shot and killed, you know, the shadow of that morning could never, you know, get out of my mind. I still remember on the morning of June 5 when I returned to my campus and I was wearing the black band, you know, the Chinese cultural way

of mourning. My teacher came over and he said that I think out of the best intention, he said, if you don't take that off, no one can protect you from now on. I tried to hold back my tears and I removed the black armband. The only choice we had was to shut, keep my mouth shut or go to jail. So, I think in 1989, we learned to lie in order to survive. So, to jump back to the post 89 era, I think the shadow of the June 4th mauling follow us. And when does it chance to. I didn't even know how to apply for schools in those days, so I just gave up the opportunity until after I was very successful and also a businessperson. And then Canada had this immigration policy. So, I was able to immigrate to Canada. So exactly 25 years ago, actually in March, I carried two suitcases, and I boarded a plane to Canada from Hong Kong, and I landed. I never been to Canada or anywhere else. And people were telling me that you should take an MBA because of your business background. But somehow, I just decided now that I'm in freedom I really wanted to do something that I have been longing to do in freedom and of course, at the time, no one would have told you, oh, Rowena, you're going to write a book or teach a course or become an academic at that time. I just I think it's just very, you know, a young woman in a free country. Finally, you had the chance to do what you want to do. And that's my natural response. I wanted to do this. And at that time, I cannot articulate this way. I think now in retrospect, I think that I want to keep the silence voices heard. I want to find out the truth, preserve the historical memory that has been taboo by the government of Beijing.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And so, in mainland China, during those 30 years, and maybe even to today, like the history of the massacre was sort of erased. Students didn't learn about it. People did not speak of it. It was just erased from the consciousness of the country.

Rowena He: It's one of the most taboo subjects in China today. The Tiananmen mothers are still not allowed to openly mourn their children. And schools does not teach it. And you cannot openly talk about it. And exiles are not allowed to return home, even for their parents' funeral. And of course, scholars are regularly banned from going to China for studying the topic. And this you've mentioned exactly as you mentioned, that is erased is not just taboo, is erased, history or twisted. They created this narrative that is a counterrevolutionary riot, is a Western conspiracy trying to divide China. But as you know, Justin that, while you can twist history, you can erase history, but that manipulation and twisting is followed by twistings of all kinds of psychological, political and social. I remember in those days, people used to ask me, Rowena, what has that to do with us? We need to bring food to the table. And then the politicians would tell me that I want to support these ideals as well. But now people are very realistic. We need the votes. And I understand all of this. And of course, like we all want a good life for our loved ones. We want to be successful. And at the time I remember my answer was we in this global village, if the plane is being hijacked. It really doesn't matter if you got a business class or I got a window seat, we will end up in the same place. And that and I remember in those days, people often asked me, Rowena, can you give me a concrete example? And at the time I said, well, I'm not sure if I have one now, but maybe later you will see one. So, you saw that in Covid. So, when the doctors was silence when Covid first started, when people cannot tell the truth and eventually, we all become the victims of the silence of one doctor's voice in China wherever you are.

Justin Angle: For you, you leave your homeland. You go to a university where you are free to study and think and express the things you are interested in and passionate about and learning about. And then as a teacher, you often engage with students, maybe Chinese students who had not learned about any of this history and some of those students pushed back. I've heard stories of students in your classes pushing back against some of the things you've, the sort of true history that you're trying to teach them. Talk about that dynamic of how your message has been received by your audience and some of the activism you've had to pursue.

Rowena He: I'm so glad that you brought this up, because that's actually exactly how I started my second book, right, about Chinese student nationalism. And, of course, you know, when I was first attacked, maybe now 2016 to 2017, this one big question that I didn't quite understand. So, for my generation, being patriotic, meaning you try to be critical and to push your government to reform. And what happened to the post Tiananmen generation who tend not to distinguish between the regime and the nation and the people and the culture and reject to any serious criticism of a government as if you are betraying the country. That's my intellectual question that I was trying to adjust when it just happened to me. And that's also the layer of the second layer of the betrayal of loyalty, right, because you were not just facing the state power. And by the way, when you mentioned that I could teach, I could research, I could write in freedom. Yes, I was in freedom. But you are not free because you would constantly be worrying about your loved ones in China and the precautions and what would be the consequences. And even if you are American or foreign academic, you would worry about losing the chance to return to China to do your field work, or you would not be able to draw

your colleagues to attend academic conferences. I do not see myself as activism, activist, activism. I still see myself as a public intellectual. I think that what I have been trying to do is to preserve the historical truth and to document historical memory. But even for something so modest, it would be perceived as radical, living in freedom but not never feeling free, that fear has never stopped. And then the second they are facing the younger generation who that I thought I was and not just me. Right? So, so many of those of us, all of sudden we have to face this accusation that you are betraying your country. And as early as the 1980s, I think, again, my generation grew up at the Tiananmen generation. We were influenced by that idea put forward by a well-known journalist, the second kind of loyalty. So, he's asking the question, you know, can a loyal citizen be critical of a government? Is this also be considered as loyalty and patriotism? So, I think that the betrayal of loyalty, I think we have always, always been loyal to those ideals of liberty and freedom. And that's what we are loyal to. And this Communist Party came into power promising the people the Chinese revolution was about those ideals and values, too. But when the revolution became, the regime became those in power. They turn against those people who tried to, you know, push them to uphold those values and this revolution. And that's why they call those people who are now being critical as the counter-revolution, as counter as against the Communist Party, but not revolutionary ideas that they had promised people.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to our conversation with Rowena He after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Rowena He, professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and an expert on contemporary China.

Justin Angle: And is that just a function of consolidation of power in trying to control people?

Rowena He: I think that's very obvious, right? You saw this in the Soviet Union and Russia. And of course, like Putin is telling people that, you know, we are doing the right thing with the invasion now in Ukraine. And I think that's typical. And you saw this throughout the Communist Party history as well. And as a historian, I'm not unfamiliar with all of this trends, but of course, were in daily life and you have to face the fear. And then when you have to face the attacks and challenges. And of course, at first, I was shocked. I was a graduate student as well, right. Like any human beings I like to be liked and I'm very Chinese as well. I don't like to be confrontational with others. So, I had learned a long way to just always be calm and use my patience. And I would have to say that in the past, maybe at least five years, I met many wonderful Chinese students who are willing to listen even when they came to a classroom with suspicion and hesitation. And all of those, of course, always with fear. But eventually I was able to convince, or they learn as well. So, I have many, many stories to tell. And in Hong Kong as well. So, you saw the white paper movement, the recent one. And this is almost like reconciliation of the younger generation. And of those people like me, finally, they are on the same page to see that the price one have to pay for speaking truth to power and also the importance for any citizens, not just Chinese or anyone like as global citizens, the importance that we need to have the freedom to speak our mind. And we all are entitled to those liberty

for academic freedom. And without any of those, there would be no true inquiry. And of course, that China has to face this past in order to have a future. Right. There's no reconciliation without truth. So, I think that Covid we suffer a lot. But at the same time, unexpectedly, because of this experience that the younger generation have to go through in China and watching how the government is presenting the narrative of Covid both inside and outside China, bring us together to realize that when the collective memory of the nation's immediate past were being manipulated and twisted, so many things would have been twisted as well.

Justin Angle: In our remaining time take a moment to describe the personal risks you have taken in your career and continue to take. I mean, it's not clear that you'll be able to go back to your university in Hong Kong. There's risk to your family. Talk about that risk and how you cope with it.

Rowena He: For a long time, I would have told you to move on to another question. I mean, anyone who asks me, and I constantly struggle between doing the right thing. It's especially painful to think about. The whole point of doing what I am doing. I mean, researching and teaching and publishing and writing and speaking about this historical past was exactly because I wanted to speak for those young lives that were violently silenced in 1989. So, it pains me to think that I cannot speak freely. But with the changes that you mentioned just now. I sometimes ask myself, especially after Covid, I'm sure, like we all have this soul searching at some point in the past three years, it seems that life is so short. And we also wanted to ask ourselves, what do you want to do? What do you want? What is most important? Can I just

wait another ten years or something? Maybe it's the same question when I was doing my Ph.D., trying to finish my dissertation and trying to write my book. People would say that, okay, look for academic publisher, do it academically, and you all have to face all the kind of challenges. Especially for me, like I didn't have someone or something to fall back on. I'm a new immigrant. If I lost the two suitcases and that's all that I had in this world. But but then you often ask yourself, why am I doing this? I could have been just in the business world and get a house and get a car. I never even own a car or a house or anything in this country. I kept teasing to my students, I said if I had been a boat person, if I worked for 20 years that hard, I could have at least got something. But I guess Tiananmen taught me many things, of course, people think about the Tiananmen massacre reminds you about repression, but I think Tiananmen also remind us to human beings a universal longing for basic rights, for freedom. And those were two things that kept me going. So now, if you ask me this questions, those were very tough questions. And I do not even know what's going to happen to me, like in two months or next year. And the reason that I value the communities, many of the communities that I have been to in this country was because individually, many of the individuals in this country or in freedom, they may not be in the position with power, but they saw me and they saw people like me and they tried to support us in our universal cause for this freedom and truth. I think it's the sense of solidarity and community that kept me going. Just like those candle lights in Victoria Park in Hong Kong, just like those hundreds of people in Denison Theater. When I was thinking about giving up, when I had all this fear, I think, is this people that kept me going, they gave me that sense of the powerless, that there's certain things that cannot be crushed by guns and tanks and jails. That's the power of the powerless.

Justin Angle: Yes. Thank you so much for sharing. And I do hope that, and I expect that when you arrive on campus and give your talk in a couple of weeks, that you will experience a similarly engaged and generous and curious audience. We're excited for your visit.

Rowena He: Yeah, thanks. I should have mentioned in the audience last time there were a number of Chinese students, and they were so shy. Or maybe they were scared. They actually waited until the crowd, everyone was gone, and I don't know where they were hiding or something. Out of the blue, they just show up in the dark, in the rain, waiting for me with, you know, both confusion on their faces, but at the same time also enthusiasm. And they started to share their stories, what their parents told them. I'm not sure if they're still in the area, but I would welcome Chinese students to come to the talk to. I hope that we would have a free conversation. And especially after all that Covid and these experiences passed. I think one thing I learned is that only when there's a discourse, then we can, I think that this country maybe can learn that too. Like only when we have a discourse, we would be able to have a future. And if we just radicalize and silence each other and brutalize each other, then without dialog and conversations, we cannot move forward.

Justin Angle: Yeah, that's a great observation. I do think that, you know, the culture we're experiencing here in the United States in no way approximates, you know, some of the oppression that you and your generation lived through. But there is a narrowing of what is

acceptable in the discourse, and that is it has to be a concern. Any comments on that from your vantage point, just observing what's happened in the dialog here in the United States?

Rowena He: When I left, the U.S. was not like this. Let's put it this way. I returned. I felt that this is a different country. I saw the tensions starting, but I started to feel that this is also global because in Hong Kong, I saw this radicalized people. The different groups were radicalizing and brutalizing each other. And people were so tempted to just shut down the dialog, the platform. I remember when I first landed in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong students didn't want to talk to the mainland students and the mainland students, the students from China, did not want to talk to the Hong Kong students so that it was such a tense moment. And that's why I said I don't care what happened outside my classroom. But if you cannot even communicate and talk to each other, like, what can we do? This is an academic institute. So, I came back. I was kind of wondering what, it just three years, I feel that I returned to a different country. It seems that trend is global, and I do hope that people would talk to each other again. And I hope that we see not just those superficially with all these politically correct slogans on either side. And one thing maybe from both an insider and outsider. I lived in this country for more than ten years, and then I was from outside as both an insider, an outsider. I really hope that you would preserve and protect democracy. My generation took to the streets in 1989. We had the goddess of democracy established in Tiananmen Square because we wanted to have the goddess of liberated, too. We wanted to have all those values you have too, and we have used generation after generation at the price of freedom and lives and tears and blood, and we still do not get it. And it pains my heart that now if you cannot protect this and preserve this and

even letting some forces to destroy it, I hope that the United States of America would unite and protect that values. That was a major part of the dreams of my generation. And I hope that I would feel that I would have a country and the place and the land to return to. If I cannot return to mine.

Justin Angle: That's very well said and deeply appreciated. Thank you. We are excited for your visit. The name of your talk is the Betrayal of Loyalty from Tiananmen to Hong Kong and will occur on April 13th at 7:30 in the University Center Ballroom. For more information, visit [Umt dot edu slash President](http://Umt.edu/President). Rowena, thank you so much for joining me today and sharing your values, your vision and your expertise with our listeners. Honored to speak with you today and excited for you to engage with the Montana community in a couple of weeks.

Rowena He: Yeah. Thank you so much Justin for the time and giving me this opportunity to speak out again after such a long time. And I look forward to seeing the cows in Montana.

Justin Angle: We got plenty of those.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

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Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.