

“I manage the fear” : being a dissident writer in China

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As the UK government receive Chinese president Xi Jinping on his state visit this week, Julia Ziemer and Yanning Huang meet dissident writer Murong Xuecun at [Asia House](#) to hear about his experience of challenging authority in today's China.

“Anyone who lives a successful life in China, you can pretty much guarantee they have no sense of morality.”

So says dissident writer Murong Xuecun, whose career took off when he began publishing online in installments in 2002 and took China by storm with his first novel [Leave me Alone: A novel of Chengdu](#).

On a visit to the UK last week to promote his second book [Dancing through Red Dust](#) whose story exposes the dark underbelly of China's legal system, Murong describes how the tales of corruption came from lawyers he knew from his days at law school: “90% of them are based on true facts” . The book was censored in China and Murong was required to write a more ‘uplifting’ ending for the print edition. Nevertheless, the publisher was shut down two years later- a sign of more sinister things to come.



Xi Jinping meets HRH Queen Elizabeth during his state visit to to UK. Credit: BBC

Social media crack-down

Since his days as an internet sensation, Murong built up an impressive online profile with over 8 million blog followers. The authorities dealt a decisive blow to this in May 2013 when his blog was shut down without warning. He wrote an [open letter](#) to protest and received a dinner invitation from a senior official in response. Taking that as a tacit threat, he declined to meet the official. Since then, he has opened numerous accounts on the Chinese networking site ‘Weibo’ that have been shut down 15 times. His main presence on social media is now [on Twitter](#), where has a more modest 50k followers. This can only be accessed in China by a small number of tech-savvy

users who use VPNs to circumvent the firewall.

With rising threats and uncertainty (he has 13 friends currently detained or in prison) why does Murong stay in China? Apart from being the home of his native language he describes another motive“ From China, I can observe...and tell the rest of the world”. And how does he cope with the knowledge he too could be arrested at any time? “I manage the fear...Police often come and knock on my door and come in as if they are my friends and sometimes they ask me to come and drink tea with them.” There are times when they restrict his movements (for example when a Japanese journalist came to Beijing to interview him, they barricaded Murong in his apartment to prevent the meeting) but so far, the interactions remain at the level of warnings.

Writing for a Global audience

Although resident in China, between Beijing and Hong Kong, Murong is now in a position that most of his output reaches a non-Chinese audience and these readers are far cry from the millions of fans he had when writing popular fiction online. When asked if he thinks emerging writers in China today could come through in the way he did, he is adamant that they could not: “Writers have less freedom that I had at the beginning”. He identifies a short golden age of internet freedom and online literature between 2009-12 when Weibo provided a platform for frank criticism and discussion. During this brief period, he says:

“The Chinese people [were] becoming not only more intelligent but braver and able to stand up to authority.”

Since then, the regime under Xi Jinping has increased surveillance and censorship via the ‘Great Firewall’, giving rise to a large number of arrests for online activity under charges such as ‘instigating conflict and creating disturbances’ online. This crime, which dates back to the founding of New China in 1949 has been increasingly invoked to detain a number of dissidents including Murong’s friend [Pu Zhiqiang](#), a famous human rights lawyer and opinion leader on Weibo. He was charged with the crime alongside ‘instigating ethnic resentment’ and the evidence used to convict him was, according to Murong, based on 28 posts of Pu’s Weibo account and looks set to stand trial.



Murong Xuecun signs copies of 'Dancing through Red Dust'

Looking to the future

As well as working on a new novel set in the near-future for which he hopes to find a Chinese publisher, Murong's regularly contributes a [column to the New York Times](#), where he has been writing since 2014. Murong says it was the NYT who approached him as someone who could shed light on the pressing issues and provide an on-the-ground perspective from China.

Given the current situation of censorship, he would advise any Chinese writers seeking to be challenging in their work to write for a "global audience" rather than a domestic one. As for his own position now, is he aiming to affect change?

| *"I don't feel I am as powerful as that...I can use my writing to explain."*

And his hope for the future in his homeland? "I still don't believe that the government will be able to continue forever to control innovation and the internet...I believe there will be a time when the Chinese people break down the great firewall"

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Further Reading:

[Is this China's bravest writer?](#) – Huffington Post

[The howls of China's prisoners will haunt this royal welcome for Xi Jinping -The Guardian](#)

[Dancing through red dust: Navigating censorship in China by Murong Xuecun – Free Word Centre](#)

[Murong's NYT column](#)

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