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**Review: Walking a Tightrope**

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**Reviewed item:**

[Walking a Tightrope: Defending Human Rights in China](http://newbooks.asia/publication/walking-tightrope-defending-human-rights-china)

Gert Holmgaard Nielsen. 2014.  
*Walking a Tightrope: Defending Human Rights in China*  
Copenhagen: NIAS Press  
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China and human rights have been viewed by the western world as being the perfect case of a square peg in a round hole. Though China has had a long tradition of suppressing dissenting voices, but the matter first came to light before the global audience during the ’89 Democracy Movement. As such, today the issue of human rights abuse, forms of resistance and rebellion in the *Tianxia*  has provided the much needed ammunition to the western press. Some of these concerns, particularly those relating to human rights, in China find their reflections in the book under review.  
  
The Danish version of the book, written in 2010, draws its name from the oblique reference to the delicate balance of a tightrope walker. Through this metaphor, Gert Nielson advises the West to maintain a similar balance in order to understand and partake in the developments of China. The main theme of the book is walking the ‘political’ tightrope which is seen as a precarious balancing act while engaging with a politically sensitive issue that coalesces with the interests of the authorities. The intention of the author has been to describe Chinese citizens at their workplaces “who have chosen to work creatively, persistently and patiently within the systems’ ambit for improving human rights situation in China” (p. xxii). The author also wants to show that it is possible for China to work towards a better future and provide fertile and durable conditions for human rights to prosper.  
  
The book consists of nine chapters besides an Introduction and a short biography of six political leaders at the end, starting with Mao in 1949 and leading to Xi Jinping, China’s current premier. Finally, it gives a chronology of key events relating to the protection of human rights from 1978 to 2014. Nielsen follows an interesting technique in his book writing where the first section of each chapter is a detailed account of the person’s pursuit for human rights while the second part is a transcription of her/his interview taken after a hiatus of two–three years. The intention is to see what and how things have changed, if at all, within this time gap with respect to human rights situation in China.  
  
Nielson has followed qualitative research methodology which includes interviews and group discussions along with secondary sources, web-based searches and documentaries for completing his research. According to the author, this work becomes significant since it is the first book by a westerner which examines human rights in China from a *positive angle* and solely from a Chinese perspective without citing any western expert. The book is based on the lives and experiences of eleven Chinese citizens who surmounted multiple challenges and setbacks in their personal and professional lives and are now hailed as human rights defenders and upholders of the ‘rule of law’ in China. However, the author appeals to these activists to take measured and incremental steps while striving to promote human rights in their country.  
  
**Human rights in China: Insiders’ views and perspectives**  
The Introduction titled ‘Human rights in China? What rights?’ summarises the arguments in the chapters that follow and sets the framework which focuses on the changing perspectives of the Chinese people on human rights in China. It also explains the intent, biases and prejudices of the western world and the press apart from the Chinese reality with respect to human rights and law in China.  
  
Chapter 1 titled ‘Democracy? Of course!’ deals with the struggles and triumphs in Wu Qing’s political career who abides by the Constitution and which has earned her the epithet ‘the lady with the Constitution’ in the media. Wu Qing has served the Beijing Municipal People’s Congress for seven terms in the last 20 years and is also a lecturer at Beijing Foreign Studies University, one of China’s most prestigious language universities. According to her, one has to fight for human rights at every step but within the Constitutional structure. Although unimpressed by the way politics is handled in China, she has hopes and currently teaches at a training centre for rural women and girls trying to make them more confident.  
  
Chapter 2 titled ‘The tightrope walker’ which provided the book’s title, is a brief life sketch of Wang Kan, a Chinese human rights activist engaged in ensuring worker’s rights in general and migrant workers in particular through his self-established grass-root organisations. These organisations train worker activists or the ‘barefoot lawyers’ to represent one another in legal wrangles involving wage disputes, accidents and occupational illnesses of migrant workers. Wang Kan uses innovative methods like role play, discussions, card games and runs a telephone helpline for the workers besides providing them with information on their rights. Wang Kan is interested in influencing the direction of change of the Chinese society and believes that possibilities are ripe for further progress by applying pressure and gaining concessions from the authorities. From a human rights perspective, Wang Kan is very positive as organisations and labour activists have realised that their relationship with the government is a dynamic one which involves frequent deliberations and evolving new strategies in case of crisis and emergency.  
  
Chapter 3 titled ‘Public interest litigation’ deals with He Hairen, who works with a public interest and legal aid firm and fights human rights cases against authorities, public offices, departments and ministries. He is an ardent votary of using media to propagate and inform citizens about their rights. According to He, human rights are not clearly defined in the Constitution and this creates the opportunity for open discussion. However, he adds that the courts are still controlled by Party leadership and not independent and therefore suggests experimenting and seeing if things work. He would like to see the implementation of democratic reforms and sees democracy as a possible direction only if the vision not only reflects the basic values of democracy but also encompasses China’s actual situation.  
  
Chapter 4 concerns the professional commitments of Wang Sixin who is a professor at the Communication University of China in Beijing and teaches media legislation and human rights. Wang Sixin recognizes the power of social media and networking in sending out information, linking people through discussions and building pressure on local officials. He is of the opinion that social media influences the decision makers directly and presently works for the authorities and publishes his views in periodicals reserved for the inner echelons of power. According to Wang Sixin, the modern Chinese society has given a number of new rights to the citizens but there is constant surveillance over the process due to fear of unrest. However, increased control on Internet searches on Google is being replaced by alternative internet- and blogging portals. He however observes that there should be a dialogical relationship between the government and citizens and feels that arranging meetings and building networks has become easier now, this ultimately promotes human rights and freedom of expression. According to him, education is an important element as it helps to understand human rights and such issues can be handled more effectively.  
  
Chapter 5 titled ‘Half the sky’, a phrase coined by Mao, focuses on the story of Li Ying, a law graduate who works as a Deputy Director of the Women’s Legal Aid Centre at the Peking University. The Women’s Legal Aid Centre lobbies and provides legal aid to women hailing from every stratum besides carrying research and brings cases of public interest litigation to the courts. Furthermore, it provides telephone help line although advice is also given via emails, chat rooms and personal meetings. Li Ying believes that equality for women in China like everywhere else cannot be achieved through demonstrations and protests but is a slow and long journey. She also adds that women’s long march towards equality with men began as an important part of the communist government’s official policy. The social construction of ‘gendered roles’ and its standardisation encouraged her to enter the ‘equality battle’. These anomalies according to Li Ying can be checked with information and education.  
  
Chapter 6 titled ‘Legal minefields’ is the story of Yang Songcai who trains police officers, prosecutors, judges and journalists on human rights through the human rights centre which he heads in Guangzhou. Yang along with Professor Li Buyun manages one of the three human rights centres and plans to have a permanent partnership in teaching future police officers. He laments the fact that human rights is still not taught as a separate subject at police academies around the country but believes that they must establish a well-developed culture of human rights. He does not think that the present culture respects human rights and adds that respect for human rights is a pre-requisite for a ‘harmonious society’ and supports proper upbringing, education, lobbying and enlightenment for effecting change in this climate of inertia. Yang further adds that basic attitudinal modification among police officers, judges and prosecutors is necessary for strengthening human rights. He feels that changing the Criminal Procedure Law and bringing defence lawyers along with the prosecution and police at the time of interviewing will accelerate the process of change in the policing system.  
  
Chapter 7 titled ‘The black children’ focuses on Liu Huawen’s fight for improving the plight of ‘black children’ or ‘black families’ or ‘invisible’ and ‘un-registered children’ due to their official non-existence in China. Such children are either abandoned by their parents shortly after birth or else belong to migrant workers and convicted criminals and have no real guardian. Liu specialises in children’s rights at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing where he heads the Research Administration Department. According to him, all Chinese children should be registered as Chinese citizens as not many have this right because it is not viewed as a human right. Liu is a strong advocate of children being seen as independent human beings and that they should treated according to their age and abilities. According to him, childhood has a value of its own and that one should listen to the children and respect their choices for which legislation on human rights is important. For this to happen, Liu advises change in our way of thinking, to focus, and to promote a new culture and mindset.  
  
In Chapter 8, titled ‘Risky proceedings’, Nielson engages in conversation with Sun Xiaohong and Wu Xia, two female lawyers from the prosecution service in one of Beijing’s many districts and who intend to discuss the general impression Chinese people have of their legal rights since the 1980s. The duo emphasise on the continual improvement of the system, they do not want to criticise anyone, and want to draw attention to the problems that exist concerning legal rights. According to Sun, torture has been strictly forbidden since 1979 as stated in the Criminal Procedure Law and she is optimistic that things will change with time. Some of the changes that have already taken effect include, for example, university trained prosecutors and judges, alteration in the nomenclature, e.g. terms as ‘criminal’ or ‘offender’ have been changed to ‘accused’, ‘suspect’ or ‘defendant’ along with changes in the treatment of suspects, and other improvements in the justice system.  
  
Chapter 9 titled ‘Human rights in practice’ is about Li Buyun, a legal expert and professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who has established four human rights centres in China. Li Buyun candidly acknowledges lack of political and personal freedom in China in the past as it required consensus but strongly feels that now it is easier to talk to the authorities on human rights issues especially since the 1990s. He is a proponent of educating police officers about their duties and responsibilities and their dos and don’ts. Li Buyun opines that it is best for China to introduce political reforms gradually while assuring people’s rights and the country’s stability. He asserts that progress is being made in the area of human rights and freedom of speech is only a section of human rights but the most basic right is the right to food.  
  
**Reviewer’s corner**  
The book provides a balanced and nuanced picture of Chinese reality as compared to the biases and prejudices held by the West with respect to human rights situation. It attempts to demystify some of the misconceptions that the western world has been yoked with and which has made the global North oblivious to some significant developments in China in the last decade and a half. But I strongly feel that Nielson should have put the spotlight on the western press, especially the US press, on account of its ‘indulgence’ in cases of massive human rights violations in the developing and under-developed nations. Beginning with colonialism to running the transatlantic slave trade which uprooted indigenous customs and cultures, languages and polity, the acts of the United States are not just condemnable but outright revolting. It has bullied third world nations into subservience through financial arm-twisting like imposing trade embargos and introducing structural adjustment programs or championing conventional warfare for oil and selling deadly weapons, drugs and kindling financial meltdowns.  
  
Living in a wired world which encourages ‘cyber socialisation’, generates ‘public opinions’ and binds the world in real time, social networking sites have a far greater outreach and subversive potential as compared to traditional media. It is this outreach and connectedness that will make it impossible for a vast country like China to suppress dissenting and democratic voices. Given the exigencies of the current situation which has produced virgin grounds for alternative perspectives to flourish, I am quite optimistic that human rights situation in China will improve in the near future.  
  
The book gives a good insight on the human rights situation as it exists in China and should be exciting for researchers and scholars interested in the area. However, the transcribed interviews are sloppy in spots. Some of the editorial flaws could have been avoided.  
  
**References:**  
Domenach, Jean-Luc (2012) *China’s Uncertain Future*. Trans. Holoch, George. New York: Columbia University Press.