



FAIR GAME

**THE ENDANGERED MEDIA SPACE FOR FOREIGN
CORRESPONDENTS INSIDE CHINA 2022**



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FAIR GAME

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CORRESPONDENTS INSIDE CHINA 2022

FEBRUARY 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This **2022 IFJ Fair Game Report** is the fourth report by the **International Federation of Journalists** in its China global media project, which focuses on China's efforts to extend its influence in the global media and sway international coverage of Chinese affairs in its favour. This work follows the IFJ's **China Press Freedom Program** (2008-2019), which documented the evolving media space in China and its impact on journalism, media infrastructure and freedom of expression.

This report focuses on Beijing's efforts to control domestic reporting by resident foreign journalists. It is based on interviews conducted by the IFJ in December 2021 with 19 current or recent correspondents from nine countries, who work across print and broadcast and whose experience in China ranges from a couple of years to several decades. It also draws from *Locked Down or Kicked Out*, the Foreign Correspondents Club of China's 2021 Media Freedoms Report, and earlier FCCC annual reports based on surveys of the club's roughly 190 members.

The research finds that China uses a wide range of coercive methods to control foreign journalists' reporting. These include:

- ★ Outright expulsions, plus threats that make journalists feel compelled to leave
- ★ Denials and delays in the granting of visas so that journalists are unable to start work on schedule or must live from one short-term visa to another, unsure if they will be there the following month
- ★ Lighter scrutiny of journalists from nations viewed as "friendly" or "unimportant", although Beijing's attitude fluctuates according to political relations between China and the home country
- ★ Lawsuits alleging breaches of reporting protocols, such as identifying oneself as a journalist, which carry the risk of being refused an exit visa until the case is resolved
- ★ Intimidation of sources, which stifles the voices of local Chinese
- ★ Old-fashioned surveillance such as tailing, intrusive monitoring and invasive official visits, including by security forces
- ★ Digital surveillance using facial recognition cameras, GPS locators, and data harvesting from social media accounts
- ★ Reports on state-run media and trolling on social media which can incite physical harassment of foreign reporters, including death threats
- ★ Provocation by "Wolf Warrior" diplomats abroad who stir up retaliation against resident foreign journalists
- ★ Targeting of foreign journalists with Chinese heritage, with accusations they are "race traitors"

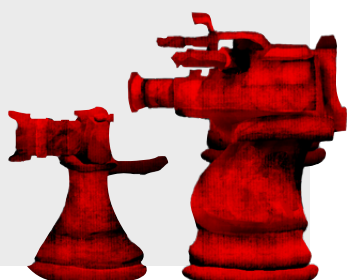


The year in numbers

The FCCC's March 2020 report, *Track, Trace, Expel: Reporting on China Amid a Pandemic*, said: "For the third consecutive year, not a single correspondent said working conditions improved." The Chinese government responded that it has never recognised the FCCC as a legal organisation.

The FCCC's December 2021 survey, results of which are contained in its report *Locked Down or Kicked Out: Covering China*, reflects a pattern of restrictions and obstruction of foreign journalists. Of 126 foreign journalists who responded to the survey:

- ★ 62% said they had been obstructed at least once by police or other officials, and 47% said they had been obstructed by unidentified individuals.
- ★ 42% said they either know for sure or suspect that an interview was canceled or withdrawn because of pressure from authorities.
- ★ Almost 40% said their Chinese staff had been pressured, harassed or intimidated by government authorities at least once.
- ★ 27 out of 31 journalists who traveled to Xinjiang in 2021 were told that reporting there was restricted or prohibited, as were 10 out of 12 journalists who tried to report in Tibet or Tibetan-inhabited areas.
- ★ Of journalists who traveled to Xinjiang in 2021, 88% said they were visibly followed, often by men in plainclothes, 44% said their interviews were visibly monitored, 44% said their interviews were disrupted, and 34% were asked or forced by authorities to delete data, such as photos or video footage they had taken in Xinjiang.
- ★ 12% said they were manhandled or subjected to other forms of physical force while doing their work. Only 3.6% said their organisation had received a new journalist J-1 visa since January 2021, with some applications for such visas having been pending for almost two years. •



INTRODUCTION

If the 2008 Summer Olympics were China's "coming out" party as a global power, the 2022 Winter Olympics are being hosted by a Beijing that is confident in its global leadership and proactive in exporting media feeds that tell the stories it wants the world to hear. Internationally, it works with local media and regimes to "tell China's story well", while inside the country it tries to control coverage by resident foreign journalists.

As the IFJ has reported, China's global strategy includes offering all-expenses-paid guided tours to China of two weeks to 10 months for foreign journalists, especially from developing countries with authoritarian governments. State-run media has also expanded its outreach to sway public opinion. This includes its "10,000 villages" plan – providing digital satellite television to 10,000 villages in 20 African countries to better enable those villagers to see coverage of China's achievements.

At the same time, reporting conditions for resident foreign correspondents in China have declined markedly, as detailed in this report.

In Hong Kong, press freedom has deteriorated considerably. A separate report prepared by IFJ affiliate the Hong Kong Journalists Association, titled *Freedom in Tatters*, focuses on those changes.

Reporting conditions in 2022 are thus vastly different from those enjoyed back in 2008.

Foreign journalists covering the Winter Olympics are required to stay in a "closed loop management system", along with athletes, Games staff and Chinese journalists, and not leave the site they are reporting from. This "closed loop" means visiting journalists are not able to report widely or freely, as many could during the Beijing Games.

The real turning point came with the rise to power of Xi Jinping over 2012 and 2013.

Freeze after 2008 Olympic thaw

It is clear in retrospect that the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics in August 2008 offered the most open climate for foreign journalists in the history of the People's Republic of China. When China won its bid to host the Games, Yuan Weimin, the country's minister of sport, said in a *New York Times* article of July 14, 2001: "Like all countries, China has certain areas where something is left to be desired." He added that economic progress "will bring along advances in culture, health, education, sport and, not least of all, corresponding progress in human rights causes."

Historically, China's public security apparatus had been deeply wary of foreign journalists. Those deemed to be digging into "sensitive" issues were often detained and made to write "self-criticisms." The *New York Times* correspondent John Burns was detained for almost a week in July 1986 and then expelled after riding through the Chinese countryside on a motorcycle. He told the *Times*: "If I'd been a spy, I certainly



“One source ... told me that he will be jailed if any information he provided makes it into international media coverage.”

Emily Feng, NPR



would not have chosen to do anything as clumsy as this way to go about gathering information.”

Two decades later, in 2006, the Foreign Ministry got rid of the old restrictions and allowed foreign journalists to travel almost anywhere and interview anyone who agreed in advance. Certain “sensitive” issues remained off limits. When protests broke out in Tibet in March 2008, a government campaign set out to discredit foreign reporting on the crackdown that followed.

With the 2008 Games accomplished, restrictions were tightened when concern rose in 2011 that the Jasmine Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa might ignite pro-democracy sentiments. Foreign bureau chiefs were told: “The regulations enacted before the 2008 Olympics haven’t changed – you just never understood them correctly.” Authorities said “advance permission” for an interview now meant whatever relevant authorities said it meant. “And if you argue with those authorities, you become the problem.”

The real turning point came with the rise to power of Xi Jinping over 2012 and 2013. Xi has told Chinese journalists their job is to be a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party and appears to want the same from foreign journalists. Conditions worsened even more in 2019 during the US-China trade war and have continued to deteriorate as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolds.

LIMITS ON ACCESS

Expulsions shut down coverage on the ground

US journalists have come under increased pressure since early 2020, when the Trump Administration expelled 60 Chinese journalists citing unfair and unequal treatment of US journalists in China. Beijing retaliated by expelling 19 correspondents and putting others on three-month visas rather than the usual one-year multiple-entry visas.

An agreement at the time of the summit between US President Joe Biden and China’s President Xi in November 2021 promised to increase numbers on both sides. However, there was no agreement that the same number of US journalists would be allowed back in, much less that they would be the same experienced, Chinese-speaking US journalists who had been there before.

BBC correspondent John Sudworth and Yvonne Murphy of Ireland’s RTE left suddenly in March 2021. In an interview with the BBC from Taipei on March 31, 2021, Sudworth said he had come under “increasing pressure from the authorities.”

“That had intensified in recent weeks and months, including a pretty intensive propaganda campaign, targeted not just at the BBC, but at me, personally, and at my reporting,” he said. “We have faced legal threats, and increased surveillance and harassment whenever and wherever we try to film.”

He lamented the “decreasing space in China for foreign journalism ... at a time when the world needs to know what is happening there more than ever.”

US-China media stand-off

US President Trump said in early 2020 he wanted to push for more reciprocity for American journalists in China. He started by designating the US bureaus of five major Chinese state-run media organisations as foreign missions of the Chinese government. Beijing retaliated by expelling three *Wall Street Journal* correspondents, all Chinese-speaking with long experience in China.

“Now the US kicked off the game,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said in a tweet, quoted by *The Economist*. “Let’s play.”

The Economist noted: “The problem for America is that, when playing this game, the side that cares about press freedom is at a disadvantage to the one that does not.”

The US State Department capped the number of Chinese citizens who could work in the US for China’s five leading state-run media organisations at 100; about 60 Chinese nationals had to leave. China retaliated again, expelling 13 US journalists working for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* – more than one in six American journalists accredited in China at the time.

China also shortened many other US journalists’ visas, from one-year multiple entry to three-month single entry. Some US journalists were told that if they left, they would have to apply from abroad for a new visa, with no guarantee it would be granted. Applications for visas for new journalists for both US and non-US media had already been frozen since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

A possible easing of the stand-off came in November 2021 when US President Joe Biden and China’s Xi Jinping held a virtual summit. The two sides agreed to relax visa restrictions, making one-year multiple-entry visas available again. But Chinese officials said they would not implement the change until the US eased restrictions on Chinese journalists. US journalists expect that, even when this happens, many experienced, Chinese-speaking journalists will not be allowed back in. Access for US journalists within China will remain far more restricted than it is for Chinese journalists in the US.

An American journalist said: “There used to be an assumption that the US is so powerful, US-China trade is so intertwined, and so much depends on the US-China relationship being stable. And so, for a long time, there was a bottom as to how bad it could get. Trump was spectacularly successful at removing that bottom. There is no bottom anymore.” •



Visas delayed to punish criticism and activism

Foreign journalists' difficulties with getting visas depend on both the Chinese government's opinion of their coverage and the state of political relations between China and their home country. Denying visas is seen as a way of deterring resident foreign journalists from reporting on "sensitive" stories. It is also used as a less direct way of expelling a journalist whose coverage is excessively critical in the opinion of the Chinese authorities.

Most foreign journalists are given one-year multiple-entry J-1 visas through a process that takes about 10 days. A decade ago, authorities started selectively disrupting that process as a form of punishment. Targeted journalists were made to wait, sometimes until the last day on which their current visa was valid, to get a new visa allowing them to stay.

A foreign journalist currently in China said: "It's abundantly clear the government has control of your visas and can control your access to the country. If I leave the country on a holiday to see my family, they never say things in a direct way, but they hint that they may not be able to help me get back in."

The Chinese government also issues shorter visas as a sanction. When Nathan VanderKlippe of Canada's *Globe and Mail* was president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of China, he was given seven one-month visas. "Each time, nearly two weeks out of that month, you're without a passport. ... I was a one-person bureau, and this was hampering my ability to do my work. So I did not run again following my one year as president."

After recognising its officers were being targeted, the FCCC instituted "collective leadership," with no individuals being named publicly as elected leaders.

By contrast, Dawn Wei Tan, bureau chief of Singapore's *Straits Times* newspaper, said the visa process while she has been in China has been "very friendly."

"We've never had delays, and we've never had our visas cut short," she said. "Some of this has to do with the bilateral relationship between Singapore and China. It's kind of at a high now. I remember in 2016, when relations were at a low, because Singapore had piped up about the South China Sea issue, that didn't make China too happy. ... The incoming bureau chief waited in Singapore for six months for his visa to be approved."

Sources intimidated into staying silent

Once inside China, foreign journalists find themselves under physical and electronic surveillance and often have problems finding sources who are willing to talk. The FCCC's 2020 report, *Track, Trace, Expel*, says China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) has been involved in intimidating sources.

Emily Feng, of US National Public Radio, said in that report: "I no longer directly call sources on sensitive stories from my phones, because I know that the Ministry of State Security in one Chinese province specifically detained and questioned potential sources after a third party called them and simply mentioned I wanted to talk to them. One source in particular has received threatening MSS calls at least once a week ... and told me that he will be jailed if any information he provided makes it into international media coverage."

Dawn Wei Tan, bureau chief for Singapore's *Straits Times*, said conditions have become more difficult over the past three years. "The people who used to talk to us, academics, even some

Visa expiry equals expulsion

Beijing sometimes declines to renew a visa or refuses to approve a visa for a resident correspondent taking up a new job. This has been used as a less direct way of expelling journalists whose coverage the government authorities feel is excessively critical. Some examples:

2012: Melissa Chan of Al Jazeera English, who often focused on human rights

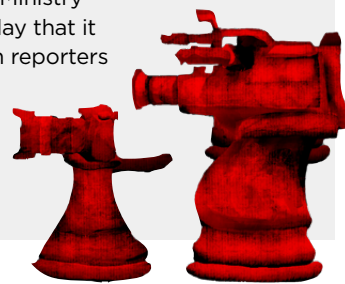
2013: Paul Mooney, a veteran correspondent who often focused on human rights, when he was seeking to work with Reuters

2014: Austin Ramzy of *The New York Times*. Authorities claimed there had been procedural irregularities when he moved from *TIME Magazine* to the NYT, but some suspected it was retaliation for a 2012 story on the wealth of former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's family.

2015: Ursula Gauthier of Buzzfeed, after reporting on surveillance in Xinjiang

2019: Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian was living and reporting in China, and had reported on Chinese government influence campaigns in the US, when she was seeking to work with Agence France-Presse.

2019: Chun Han Wong, a Singapore national reporting for *The Wall Street Journal* in Beijing since 2014, was denied renewal of press credentials and a journalist visa. He had co-authored a report on Xi Jinping's cousin, Ming Chai, a naturalised Australian, being investigated in Australia for suspected money laundering. The WSJ's Charles Hutzler reported: "Asked about its decision to not renew the credentials, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Friday that it 'opposes individual foreign reporters who maliciously smear and attack China. These types of reporters are not welcome.'" •



government official sources, told us, 'I'm sorry, we can't talk to you anymore.' Some were more candid and said, 'We've been given instructions not to talk to foreign media.'

"By the time Covid started, they had already shut down," Wei said. "We couldn't get into Wuhan. We were doing phone interviews or video interviews, because we wanted to talk to medical workers there, and we kept getting turned down when they heard we were foreign media. In that sense, it didn't matter whether you were a 'friendly' Asian media or a hostile Western media. It was a blanket ban."

A European broadcast journalist said: "The only place it's easier is in the countryside, where people see foreigners less often and are curious. But the goons come very quickly, and then it's hard to work."



OLD-FASHIONED SURVEILLANCE

Watched, followed, monitored

Foreign journalists travelling outside the cities where they are based report being followed, sometimes conspicuously.

A wire service reporter said: “As soon as I got in a taxi, they knew where I was going. They tuned in to the taxi driver’s GPS, and the police were texting the taxi driver and telling him not to take me where I wanted to go.”

Michael Smith, *The Australian Financial Review*’s former Shanghai correspondent, said: “We went to Qinghai, to Golmud, to do a story on an Australian magnesium company. ... We got to our hotel at 11:30pm, and all these women from the waiban (the local government office dealing with foreigners) came knocking at our door, wanting to know what we were doing there, and pretending to be concerned about our health, because we were at high altitude. There were four cars following us around for three days. There were lots of Tibetans and a military base nearby, so it was a hyper-sensitive part of China. In the end, they didn’t stop us doing our stories, but I was a bit taken aback by the surveillance.”

Pervasive surveillance and interference in Xinjiang

Foreign journalists visiting Xinjiang report being followed, being made to delete photos and having their sources intimidated.

Atsushi Okudera of Japan’s *Asahi Shimbun*, said: “When I was in Urumqi (in October 2020), I visited eight different mosques, and three white cars were following me all the time.” He also visited six mosques in Kashgar, where two men followed him. “When I took a photo, they were 10 or 15 meters away, watching, to put pressure on me. And when I was eating, they also went to the same restaurant, and sat at a nearby table ... And if I had an interview with someone local, the people knew there was someone behind me, so they wouldn’t say anything.”

By contrast, Simon Leplâtre of *Le Monde* said he noticed in April 2019 that pressure was much lower than on previous trips to Xinjiang. “Police were less present on the street. There were fewer checkpoints in the city, and fewer checks for us. We could report in Kashgar or Urumqi without being bothered too much. We weren’t followed, until we went to villages ... I wonder if they think their reeducation program has kind of worked, and now the police are in people’s minds. Because despite the lower pressure, most people didn’t talk to us, or gave a propaganda version, or said ‘I don’t know.’”

NEW ERA OF DIGITAL TECH

Covid and the big data bonanza

At the time of the 2008 Olympics, the security forces routinely snooped on journalists through their mobile phones. Some left their phones at home when going to a sensitive interview, or even when going on a multi-day reporting trip.

By 2021, China had become a world leader in technology, and security forces had installed far more sophisticated surveillance systems. There are some 200 million surveillance cameras throughout the nation and now, in Covid times, QR codes have to be swiped to get into many buildings, shopping malls and modes of transport.

An American journalist said: “When the history of this period is written, it will be about how the pandemic period helped the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) massively expand and improve its surveillance. To get into many places, you have to scan an app. There’s a huge amount of information out there that’s being used for God-knows-what purpose ... The same kind of personal data that helps with disease control helps with other surveillance too.”

According to Reuters, at least one Chinese province, Henan, is making a special effort to track foreign journalists and foreign students, using “3,000 facial recognition cameras that connect to various national and regional databases.” The agency reported on November 29, 2021 that a contract worth US\$782,000 for the work had been awarded to the Chinese tech company Neusoft.

Donald Maye, the Head of Operations IPVM, told Reuters: “While the PRC has a documented history of detaining and punishing journalists for doing their jobs, this document illustrates the first known instance of the PRC building custom security technology to streamline state suppression of journalists.”

Social media apps an open channel for police

Another mode of surveillance is through WeChat, a convenient, all-in-one app that had a billion active monthly users by 2018. This enables WeChat’s owner, tech giant Tencent, to centralise reams of personal data. This is convenient for the security forces too, as is a 2017 law that requires companies and individuals to share information when required by the intelligence agencies.

The Economist’s China bureau chief David Rennie said arranging interviews on WeChat is “like opening the door of a police station and shouting into it.” Several correspondents said sources have cancelled interviews once public security officials intercept the communication and advise them not to go ahead. A broadcast journalist said: “Every year that passes, it becomes more difficult. It affects the way we can cover stories, and it’s impacting the number of stories we can do, because every story takes more time.”

“I wonder if they think their reeducation program has kind of worked, and now the police are in people’s minds.” Simon Leplâtre, *Le Monde*





AUTHORITIES PROVOKE ATTACKS

Social media stoke hostility and physical harassment

Verbal attacks by government spokespeople, state-owned media and social media on individual journalists as well as on their media organisations are increasing, sometimes resulting in threatening personal confrontations.

When floods swept through central China's Henan province in July 2021, BBC correspondent Robin Brandt did a stand-up report on a subway platform in the provincial capital, Zhengzhou, describing how floodwaters had risen in the subway tunnel and on the train, killing 12 people. Many locals interpreted the translated version as an accusation that not enough was done to save lives. Henan's Communist Youth League asked its 1.6 million followers on Chinese social media site Weibo to report Brandt's whereabouts, the FCCC said on July 27, 2021.

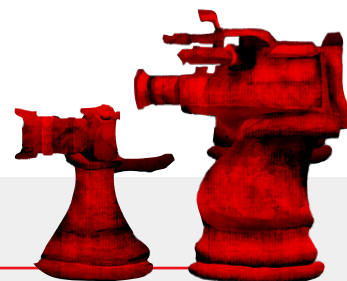
A few days later, a Zhengzhou crowd saw a Caucasian man with a camera and assumed it was Brandt. They started to pull on his arms and clothes, shout at him and prevent

"If you see this reporter, beat her to death."

A threat on social media

him from leaving. The man was German journalist Mathias Boelinger, on assignment for Deutsche Welle. Eventually the crowd realised they had the wrong foreign journalist and eased up. Even so, the Henan Communist Youth League Weibo post drew public comments and China-based staff for the BBC, *Los Angeles Times* and others received intimidating messages and calls, including death threats.

The Foreign Correspondents Club of China said on Twitter it was dismayed at the growing hostility and censorship and the deteriorating working environment for the foreign press.



Authorities pressure local staff

Chinese researchers and news assistants play a critical role for foreign news bureaus. Not only do they suggest and research topics, but their knowledge adds depth, nuance and perspective, even when they are working with foreign journalists who are fluent in Chinese.

Haze Fan, a researcher for US newswire Bloomberg, was last seen on July 12, 2020 being led from her building by plain clothes security officers. Chinese officials said at the time she was being held on suspicion of national security law violations.

John Micklethwait, editor-in-chief of Bloomberg News, said: "We are all very worried about her wellbeing and we will continue to do everything we can to help her and her family."

Several journalists interviewed by the IFJ cited new restrictions on the hiring of Chinese staff as impediments to reporting. Foreign news bureaus are required to hire Chinese staff from the government-run Diplomatic Services and Personnel Corporation (DSPC), which is taking longer to approve new researchers and has blocked some altogether.

"It can take up to a year now, to get permission to hire a particular assistant," said an American journalist. "One correspondent who protested when a top candidate was denied was told by Chinese authorities, 'Your candidate knows why [they weren't hired].'"

The authorities are limiting the number of Chinese staff to one per accredited correspondent. This is a change from the period spanning the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when bigger foreign news bureaus had Chinese staff to do substantive reporting, often with a shared byline or tagline, even though this was not officially allowed. Regulations regarding

what Chinese citizens working with foreign news bureaus can do are now much more tightly enforced, according to both the FCCC survey and foreign journalists interviewed by the IFJ.

Some researchers and news assistants working for more prominent news media are more regularly "asked out for tea" by public security officers, who want to know what the correspondents with whom they work are doing. This includes not only what stories have been done, but also what stories are being planned, so security officials can prevent "sensitive" issues from being reported at all. Resident foreign journalists say Chinese staff are at times pressured or threatened, and that public security personnel have sometimes contacted family members of Chinese staff, saying the employee in question should seek a different job.

Not all Chinese staff are pressured in this way. Dawn Wei Tan, the Singapore *Straits Times*' bureau chief, said: "My Chinese assistants haven't been called in for tea by the PSB (Public Security Bureau). The fact that we're ethnic Chinese, and speak the language, and are quite often able to pass ourselves off as local Chinese, means we can go out and report on our own, without our assistants coming with us."

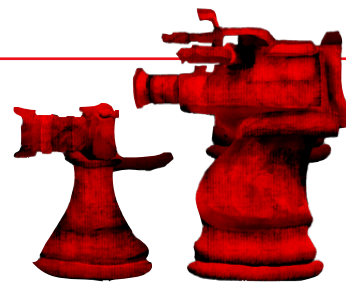
Several other correspondents also said they try to leave their news assistants or researchers at the bureau when reporting on "sensitive" issues.

"The feeling is, I have a great deal of sympathy and respect for this individual, and I know they're relatively vulnerable compared to me," said one foreign journalist. "And so, it's my duty not to place them in a situation that could hurt them or their family." •



“The idea of a free press ... was a difficult notion for many in China’s Foreign Ministry to grasp.”

Michael Smith, *The Australian Financial Review*



State media incite death threats to ‘race traitors’

China’s state-owned English language newspaper *The Global Times* ran an article on October 10, 2021 with the headline: “Govt staff rewarded for tip-off on anti-China media which sneak into China’s poverty alleviation model city Bijie, spread false info.”

The story’s first eight paragraphs slammed this unnamed “anti-China media aimed at spreading false information on China’s poverty alleviation drive and ... who lured government staff to engage in espionage activities in the city.” Deep in the story, the focus shifted to National Public Radio correspondent Emily Feng, who had come to Bijie in Guizhou province in April 2021. Feng’s report on the NPR website carries the headline, “China Says It Has Ended Poverty. Is That True?”

The Global Times said Feng was “misinterpreting words from local residents to smear China’s poverty eradication efforts.”

She was trolled on social media, with photos and screenshots of her previous reports, sexually explicit comments, and threats such as “If you see this reporter, beat her to death.”

David Rennie, bureau chief for *The Economist*, said: “As a middle-aged, British, white guy, I’m aware I’m somewhat shielded from the worst nationalist attacks, which are especially aimed at young, female journalists of Chinese heritage, accused of being race traitors. And when I’ve raised that in conversations with officials here, I’ve been dismayed to hear that it’s understandable for Chinese people to feel indignant if someone of Chinese heritage writes something critical about China.”

Wolf Warrior diplomats abroad whip up aggression at home

Under Xi Jinping, Chinese officials at home and diplomats abroad are encouraged to adopt an aggressive style known as “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, which treats unwelcome stories as an affront, an insult, or a slander to be silenced.

Simon Leplâtre of *Le Monde* said: “I’ve been attacked online by the Chinese embassy in Paris, repeatedly, because the new Chinese ambassador in France, Lu Shaye, is proud of being a Wolf Warrior. And the (Chinese) embassy is very vocal about the reporting they don’t like by French journalists in China. They publish these attacks on the Chinese embassy’s website, and on Twitter. It’s then taken up by the *Global Times*, and that’s when it becomes more worrying ... It’s in China, and then you don’t know if people will take action.”

SECURITY FORCES’ HEAVY PRESENCE

Journalists flee for fear of being trapped

China’s civilian counter-intelligence, foreign intelligence and political security agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), is increasingly becoming involved in the interrogation of foreign journalists and their Chinese colleagues.

In September 2021, the last two Australian journalists in China, Michael Smith of *The Australian Financial Review* in Shanghai and Bill Birtles of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Beijing, were preparing to leave because Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade had advised them relations had grown tense.

On the night of September 2, groups of seven MSS officers knocked on their doors. The officers informed the journalists they were barred from leaving China because they were to be questioned in relation to a national security case. The next morning, Smith fled to Australia’s consulate in Shanghai and Birtles to the Australian Embassy in Beijing.

Birtles said he found the Ministry of State Security’s approach perplexing. “On one hand, this is urgent enough for them to rock up to my front door at midnight, with a total of seven people to tell me I’m involved in a state security case. On the other hand, they say, ‘Hey, we’ll ring you tomorrow afternoon to organise a chat.’”

It took four days for Australian diplomats to negotiate safe exit for Smith and Birtles, including a Chinese condition that the journalists submit to questioning about their relationships with Chinese-Australian journalist Cheng Lei, who had been detained in August.

Smith told IFJ: “They never accused us of anything ourselves. But for us to be able to leave China, we had to do an interview with the Ministry of State Security about the Cheng Lei case. But it was all for show. It was meaningless. I didn’t know Cheng Lei. I’d met her in a bar in Beijing for about one minute.”

Smith went first to Australia. His editor felt sending him or any other AFR journalist back to China was too risky, so closed the bureau and assigned Smith to Tokyo.

Smith said: “I’ve continued to cover China, and there are a lot of journalists now covering China from outside, and it’s really difficult, to be honest. You’re not on the ground. You can’t read the mood. You can’t talk to ordinary people.

“Our paper is a business paper, and we try to be as balanced as we can. But you end up writing more negative stories, because you’re talking to people who are outside of China and able to speak freely.”

Smith wrote in his book *The Last Correspondent*: “The idea of a free press, or a media that did not work for its government, was a difficult notion for many in China’s Foreign Ministry to grasp. Australian diplomats were constantly asked why the government allowed journalists to write negative stories about China.”

Lawsuits, exit bans raise level of threat

At least three lawsuits have been filed against foreign journalists for allegedly not identifying themselves as journalists, not asking interviewees’ permission or misquoting them, the FCCC reported. The journalists involved have denied all such allegations.



Nathan VanderKlippe of Canada's *Globe and Mail* was served with lawsuit claiming a violation of image rights from someone he had interviewed three times. He said: "In the end, I won. My law firm had the transcript of our WeChat interview, which this guy had deleted. I had screenshots of it all. It was clear I had identified myself clearly and quoted him accurately."

"But that idea that there are elements of the law in China that are written in such a way they can be used to take on a journalist very easily, in courts that can't always be trusted to come up with an outcome that's not politically influenced – that was very, very frightening."

The Economist's bureau chief David Rennie said: "I now always wear my press card around my neck when I'm out interviewing people. ... When I'm approaching people in a village or a town, the first words I say are 'I'm a foreign journalist. I'm with *The Economist*.'"

Other journalists said the aim seemed to be to scare foreign journalists into reconsidering what they choose to cover and how. The person being sued could also be subject to an exit ban, so they could not leave China. One said: "It's designed to be chilling."

UNEVEN ENFORCEMENT

Chosen media subjected to lighter scrutiny

Some foreign journalists in China experience few of these challenges, for myriad reasons, such as that their focus is on non-sensitive issues, or because they are from a country and/or media organisation considered friendly or not important enough to worry about.

A Latin American journalist said: "I always received from the Central government and institutions an easy-going and welcoming demeanor. No problem with procedures, very friendly. I know this is not the case with Western journalists. But I think they (the Chinese government) also don't see Latin American journalists as a threat."

The journalist did experience the same growing suspicion of foreign journalists in the Chinese public from about 2018 onward and was effectively kicked out of town by a local mayor when reporting on an apparent human trafficking operation.

"I did know of colleagues from Spain, or from other Latin American countries, who were called in for chats with government officials when they interviewed certain human rights defenders. And the whole thing was very friendly, very Chinese. They invited them to an expensive dinner, and suggested they not cover a topic, because 'these sources aren't very credible.'"

Asian "neighbours" not immune

Japanese and South Korean journalists make up at least one-third of all foreign journalists based in China, with about 40 South Korean journalists, and 100 Japanese correspondents – 60 in Beijing, and the rest scattered around the country in bureaus in Chongqing, Dalian, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang and Shenzhen.

A Japanese journalist said that in 2012, when the China-Japan relationship was bad, many of the journalists being targeted were Japanese, while China's relationships with Australian and Canada were good. "When I came back last year, I was really surprised that Western journalists were having problems getting visas and Japanese journalists were easily getting multiple-entry, year-long J-1 visas, much more easily than Americans," he said. The exception was *Sankei Shimbun*, a nationalist, conservative Japanese newspaper that by late 2021 was down to one correspondent from three.

He noted that, as a Japanese, it was easier to blend in, and Chinese local and national officials sometimes pointed out that Asian journalists are neighbours, unlike Western journalists. "Maybe they're trying to divide us."

Even so, reporting on "sensitive" stories remains challenging.

"In Xinjiang and Jilin, I was followed, and police officers entered my hotel room almost every day. That didn't happen a decade ago ... It is a really big change. We're all afraid for the safety of Chinese contacts, and I can't talk with my Chinese friends so easily anymore."

Atsushi Okudera, a correspondent with Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, said that in 2012 police seized his camera and beat him when he was covering an environmental protest in Qidong, Nantong, Jiangsu province. He said they shoved him to the ground and kicked him, and never returned his camera.

Okudera said he tries to communicate directly with officials. "When I was in Beijing and Shanghai, I knew people in the Public Security Department and State Security. So I knew what their concerns were, and they knew what kind of person I am, and what I'm interested in. Otherwise, you're just a name, and then miscalculation can easily happen."

"We're all afraid for the safety of Chinese contacts, and I can't talk with my Chinese friends so easily anymore."

Japanese journalist





CONCLUSION

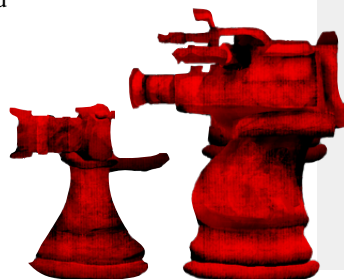
Many Chinese are proud of the economic and social transformation their nation has made over four decades of reform and opening up. Between the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics, Beijing has embraced its role as a global leader, building a new network of global trade and global power with the Belt and Road Initiative, weighing in on rule-making and standards-setting, and taking a lead in a growing number of international bodies. This, to China's leaders, is a success story, and one foreign journalists should "tell well."

When foreign journalists cover China, they see a complex and dynamic place with many contradictions. While Xi Jinping talks about there being just one "China Dream" – for China to be great again in the world – foreign journalists bring their own experience and perspectives to bear. Accepting those differences – especially when they lead to stories the Chinese government feels are negative, critical, or even unfair – has long been a challenge for China's ruling elite.

That impulse plays out in the treatment of foreign journalists, especially toward those reporting for the world's most influential media, including those from the United States. Surveillance, denial or limiting of access, pressure, punishment, detentions and sometimes expulsions are all weapons to keep resident foreign correspondents in line. This approach rarely succeeds.

After years of Wolf Warrior diplomacy, positive sentiment toward China has dipped in many parts of the world, according to opinion polls by Pew and Afrobarometer, among others. China's leaders want the world to see China's authoritarian but efficient system as superior to messy Western democracies, and China's experienced Communist Party leadership as natural leaders of a new world order. That is still a hard sell for much of the world's population, who draw their own conclusions about China's story, based on their own experience as well as what they see, hear and read from journalists.

David Rennie, China bureau chief for *The Economist*, said: "In some ways, the foreign press in China is one of the canaries in the coal mine for quite a lot of foreign governments from the democratic world. For embassies in Beijing, for instance, one of the questions they're trying to answer is, 'What does China's rise mean for the world?' And to a greater extent than in the past, one of their markers for how to judge China's rise is their treatment of foreign journalists, and how they deal with the friction of having criticism from foreign journalists. It's part of being a great power. And as China becomes a great power, there's the question of 'how anxious should that make us?'" •



Recommendations

- ★ Authorities should respect the rights and role of correspondents and a free press in reporting important stories inside China to a global audience, including the right to different narratives and forms of reporting.
- ★ A shrinking international press corps makes it harder to tell China's story comprehensively, authoritatively and with nuance and understanding. A reform of the approach to foreign media is necessary, fair, and reasonable in light of the expanding media space now being taken up by Chinese media globally in virtually every continent as foreign governments allow Chinese journalists to do.
- ★ Attacks on foreign journalists led by China's state media or affiliates on social media should be condemned as a practice that imperils journalist physical safety and reflects negatively on China and its operations globally.
- ★ Foreign embassies based inside China should continue to advocate and speak for greater access and an end to harassment of their nation's correspondents.
- ★ Journalist unions and other press freedom and journalism advocacy groups should develop resources for journalists reporting in China, to help them understand the dangers and challenges, including reporting on sensitive issues, minimising their electronic footprint and best practices to protect sources, local researchers, and news assistants.
- ★ Correspondents reporting inside China should be trained on safe story planning, authority tactics to block reporting and the processes to report back and check-in to their employers and loved ones.
- ★ Foreign journalists of Chinese or Asian heritage present a new frontline for reporting but one that also comes with inherent risks. Any targeting of Chinese heritage journalists as "race traitors" or otherwise should be strongly condemned.
- ★ The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and others should continue attempts to engage with the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) to strengthen mutual understanding and to address concerns over visas, the safety of journalists and other matters. •