

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A FOREIGN JOURNALIST IN CHINA?  
MICRO-DOCUMENTARIES OF CHINA-BASED JOURNALISTS

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You are sick when you wake up in the morning. You wonder if it has something to do with the polluted air in Beijing. It must, you think to yourself. You ritually put on your mask, doubting it is actually protecting your lungs. You get elbowed and pushed around on the subway. People are rude. You are in a bad mood. Then you have an interview for a story that could only happen in China. Toward the end of the day, Beijing surprises you with a beautiful sunset. Well, it is not all bad, you think.

China is the enticing, annoying partner with whom journalists share a love-hate relationship. With its unlimited stories and growing importance, China has helped a number of journalists establish and distinguish themselves in the field. Opportunities are everywhere. Young, inexperienced photographers like Mark Leong could walk into *The New York Times*'s office in the early 1990s, present his portfolio and get assignments.

In 89, there were no international photographers here; there were very very few people here. I was kinda young and not very experienced and not so good. But I was the only one. So I got jobs that other people don't get. I can just walk into *The New York Times*'s office and say this is my work and do you have any jobs for me? And I can get it. You can't do that in America. You can't just walk in New York and say I want a job from *The New York Times*. You can't do that. But that was what you can do here. You could meet everybody. Back in the day, there were all these journalists in Jianguomenwai in one compound within you know across one city block, you could see every single magazine you want to see and talk to them just like that without appointment almost. Or you could just wander into them at a party; they would all be there. (Interview with Leong)

It is professionally satisfying to write about a country full of energy and surprises. Leong, who first arrived in mainland China one day after the crackdown on Tiananmen Square, found

himself getting used to seeing a neighborhood disappear after only one summer and watching geographic changes happen created by the nation's ambitious Three Gorges Dam Project.

It's like somebody is playing a game, it's like toys, these children's toys, you know, a child is playing like a city and just putting oh I'm gonna take this down, oh I'm gonna put this here, move the road around here, just some huge hands like moving things all around. (Interview with Leong)

Journalists who came in the late 1980s and early 1990s would say China's living conditions have largely improved. In those days, there were no grocery stores, restaurants, cafes or teahouses. Residents living in the nation's capital could only afford cabbages in the winter, as Leong remembered. The lack of public places made it difficult for journalists to meet people, let alone spend time with them.

For those that have lived in China over the past twenty years, today it feels like living in a different country. Former *Time* Beijing Bureau Chief Matthew Forney had witnessed China changing from the meiyou (nothing) place to the can-do place.

## **Censorship**

No one can give a definite answer if conditions for China-based foreign journalists have improved. China was a particularly optimistic place in the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics. Beijing [implemented policies](#) to restrict the number of vehicles on the road and relocate polluting factories to ease the air pollution. The government was also welcoming and cooperative to foreign press.

The number of foreign journalists rose from 353 in 2002 to 859 by the end of 2008. The number was down to 655 in 2013.

At the end of every year, foreign journalists are still in fear of losing their accreditation because of their reporting. With a capricious government, AP reporter Didi Tang said, journalists

could face the accusation they did not cross the street properly, and authorities could say that by violating Chinese laws, the journalist could face being expelled.

In 2012, *Al Jazeera* reporter Melissa Chan was the first foreign journalist [expelled](#) from the country since 1998. *The New York Times* Shanghai Bureau Chief David Barboza had been harassed because of his Pulitzer Prize-winning article about the family wealth of [China's former Prime Minister](#). As punishment, the government blocked the newspaper's website in China and rejected Barboza's colleague Chris Buckley's visa renewal. For journalists who stay in China, once a while, they are invited to have tea with police officers.

Censorship does not only come from the state, but also within news organizations. *Bloomberg* [underwent a lot of heat](#) when the publication was accused of having curbed an investigative article out of the fear of being expelled from China.

In 2006, *Time* magazine fired all its overseas bureau chiefs as a result of the company's downsizing. As *Time*'s Beijing bureau chief since 2000, Forney was one of them. During his tenure at *Time*, the publications of Time Inc. were [banned in China](#) because of *Time*'s 2001 reportage on Falungong, a topic remains to be sensitive in China. The ban took the company's Chinese version of non-political magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* down off the shelves at newsstands across China.

“So in order to lift the ban on *Time* magazine, I came under a lot of pressure to write really positive stories about China, which I wouldn't do,” Forney said.

*Time Asia* did a cover story on Shanghai, which was purely positive. And you know in a conference call, journalists working on this story were specifically instructed not to have a fourth paragraph which says you know beneath the shiny mirror of new Shanghai lies the city underbelly of the old Shanghai. None of that. Just the positive story of China. And like two weeks later after that, the ban was lifted. And the *Time* magazine launched their publications. It was scandalous. I mean I couldn't believe it happened. (Interview with Forney)

After [the September 27, 2004](#) issue, the ban was lifted.

The censorship also infiltrates into every level of Chinese media. Foreign journalists praised the good journalism done by Chinese journalists who risked their career and freedom to investigate sensitive subjects. However, journalists who can read American newspapers and get a good grasp of American politics do not get much knowledge about Chinese politics reading local press.

A majority of governmental officials do not talk to foreign press. “You can’t get interviews with the government,” *New York Times* correspondent Ian Johnson said, mentioning the hostility government has toward foreign press. “We try; we almost never do. So whether they like us or don’t like us, it almost doesn’t matter unfortunately.”

Johnson once had a conversation with a provincial official in charge of migration. He said it helped him understand the challenges local governments face and the work that officials put into improving the situation. The coverage would be better if the stories could include the government’s perspective, Johnson said. Unfortunately, most officials find it too risky to talk to foreign journalists.

One significant character of international news is that it contains more analysis. Chinese readers might be fine reading every single arrest during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s campaign against corruption. However, few readers outside of the country want to learn every detail of those arrests. Journalists usually try to find a theme to carry those events together, and there comes the need to explain the context behind the story.

The lack of a vibrant local press and access to governmental officials makes it more difficult for foreign journalist to provide context. Johnson said that journalists’ interpretation could at times be wrong and misleading.

AP reporter Tang once worked on a story about a young mother who was suspected of having [flushed her newborn baby down the toilet](#). Somebody put a line in the story that this incident had something to do with China's highly controversial one-child policy. The story did not say if the mother was married. Born and raised in China, Tang was aware of the stigma in Chinese society that could have shamed an unwed woman into abandoning her baby. Foreign journalists danced around the fine line between helping the audience understand the issue and providing misleading context. This is when perspectives from native Chinese can be of help.

Tang said she appreciates foreigners' fresh views on China that natives do not have. It would be healthy to have a pool of journalists with diverse backgrounds. However, [Chinese citizens are not allowed](#) to work alone as reporters when hired by foreign press. This policy successfully prevented seasoned Chinese journalists from working for foreign news outlets. Foreign news organizations usually hire young Chinese, many of whom with overseas educations, as research assistants.

Johnson thinks foreign journalists rely too heavily on their assistants, who do not get the credit they deserve. He calls it a dirty secret that makes correspondents appear to be doing more work than they actually are.

I think it creates a kinda unhealthy situation when you are relying on the researcher to do a lot of work. And where a lot of foreign correspondents you know don't really get out. Again it's partly because of this whole modern Internet thing where everybody's stuck behind a desk all the time. But it's also partly because in China, you can get away with it because your editors back home just see your byline. They don't see that the other person did most of the work because that person is not allowed to get a byline. If they get a byline, maybe the editor would say hey why is that person doing all that work and you are the correspondent? But the way is in China cause you are not allowed to get a byline, it makes it look like people are doing more work. (Interview with Johnson)

Journalists with limited language skills cannot do their job independently in China. An overwhelming percentage of veteran China-based journalists believe one has to possess somewhat proficient language skills to produce value-added work.

“Because if you don’t, you are either confined to writing superficial stories or pirating other peoples’ opinions,” said Chris Hawke, a former journalist who taught journalism at the Communication University of China and worked at state-controlled media *Global Times*.

If you say what if there’s a Chinese person who went to the United States and could only speak broken English and couldn’t read or write English, couldn’t read *the New York Times*, couldn’t read the *Wall Street Journal*, couldn’t read the congressional record or anything like that, and they were your U.S. correspondent? What would you think of them? And What if most of their interviewers are Chinese-speaking experts in New York or Washington? What would you think about this person’s work? You probably would be skeptical. (Interview with Johnson)

When freelance writer Lara Farrar worked in the U.S., she did not leave her story until the last minute. But it was inconvenient to keep following her subjects as long as she wanted when she had an assistant with her. In order to protect their Chinese assistants (who could be [charged with revealing state secrets](#)), journalists could not always take their assistants with them when reporting on sensitive topics. When journalists cannot report without the presence of assistants, their workflow changes and as a result their coverage is sometimes compromised.

### **The Critique of Western Coverage**

There is good journalism and there is bad journalism. The Western coverage of China is often criticized for reinforcing stereotypical presumptions about China that do not help audiences understand this fast-changing society.

“There’s a lot of things about China that are very alarming and upsetting for people who hold like American core values, and if you read the Western coverage of China, you will see those things paraded in front of you,” Hawke said. “I think you could read about China in the

Western press everyday and not really ever get a sense of what it feels like to be a Chinese person.”

Readers who follow China are familiar with the stories of political artist Ai Weiwei and blind lawyer Chen Guangchen. No journalist doubts the importance of stories on human rights, censorship and many other sensitive topics that deserve comprehensive coverage.

However, some journalists question if the news disproportionately focuses on certain groups such as the elites and dissidents. As a result, the dreams and worries of ordinary Chinese who constitute the mainstream society are largely overshadowed.

I mean I'm glad someone is keeping track of the number of lawyers who get put in jail. It's important that someone is keeping track of that. But I don't know, there's something... For a thoughtful person who follows China, there's a point when I was like ok, I get it. They are putting all the lawyers in jail. What, what do you think of it like? Why is that happening? What's gonna happen next? What else is happening? What other things are going on in China? (Interview with Hawke)

This isn't special to China, but it is kinda telling in China that everyone has the same sort of stuff. You know it's amazing how many people have done the same stories like how many people have done profile of Ai Weiwei, how many people you know get the Chen Guangchen story. I mean sometimes these are big stories and it's legitimate. But like Chen Guangchen, ok, he flies, flees to U.S embassy. You have to do the story. But I mean sometimes it's like why everyone is so fixated on everything Ai Weiwei does. Is it really that important? Is he so important? I don't think he is really. But you know it's easy. People. This is again not special to China. This is a problem journalists have in lots of different countries. But they tend to do the easy stories, the obvious stories. Journalists always try to be efficient and they have to do the article quickly and go to the interview and then maybe at the most spend two or three days on an article and then write. And I think the modern era has increased that. There aren't too many newspapers to give you much time to do it. They are all in a rush you know, they all want things done quickly. They all say why don't you have the article, all other people have that article, why don't you have it, you know? So that's... Those are the problems. That was the same in 1980's. The funny thing is, in 1980's, people didn't have a choice. Sometimes they wanted to interview a rich businessman, you know the time, the first business people weren't getting rich. Maybe the government would arrange some meeting to see some rich businessmen. You didn't have a choice because you couldn't talk to people. So everyone did the

same profile. Now we do the same, it's the same problem but for different reasons. (Interview with Johnson)

Most ordinary Chinese do not necessarily feel they live in an oppressed country, Hawke said. But journalists usually experience the censorship personally and professionally.

There is a saying among foreign journalists: if you made the government mad and got kicked out, you've done a good job, Farrar said.

“China, I suspect, sometimes gets more negative coverage than it deserves because its old system of restricting the activities of foreign correspondents pushes them into taking sides,” [wrote](#) *Guardian* reporter Jonathan Watts, who covered China from 2003 to 2012.

Journalists are aware of the criticism and challenge reporting in a foreign country like China. Due to the financial cutback in the industry and the fast pace of the modern era, journalists are expected to have higher productivity; stories are expected to be turned in quickly. It is not uncommon for journalists to find themselves sitting behind the computer, reading Xinhua News and press releases, interviewing two or three experts on the phone and writing articles without talking to anybody on the ground.

When it comes to breaking news, social media becomes handy for journalists to find reliable sources before journalists arrive at the scene. Meanwhile, the Internet makes it possible for anyone interested in China to subscribe to email newsletters such as [Sinocism](#). The website sends four to five emails every week to subscribers with major headlines regarding China. If journalists get their story ideas from similar outlets like Sinocism, the likelihood of producing copycat stories runs high.

Journalists tend to have this pack mentality or this herd mentality where everybody does the same story. And ironically in some way I think with the Internet and all that, it hasn't necessarily gotten better. Because everybody just looking on twitter, everybody is you know figuring out what everyone else is doing after ones reading the same stuff. There are guys who do nothing but write

newspaper headlines. For example, this guy, Bill Bishop, has this blog, Sinocism, you can sign up for it. It used to be everyday. Now he's doing just once a week. But basically I don't know why he does it for free. That's kinda funny in a way. He must have too much time. You know cause he was like a millionaire. So I don't quite understand it. Anyway, you have people like that and everyone is reading this. Everyone is reading the same email. Oh, the important things are these eight stories. So it's kinda, even though we have more sources of information, Twitter and Weibo and stuff like that. (Interview with Johnson)

Copycat stories are easy, Johnson said, and maybe that explains why everyone is fixated on everything Ai Weiwei does.

### **Roles and Purposes**

Living in China leaves a lasting mark on journalists. Standing at the train station, where thousands of people were jammed together in a waiting mob, gave Leong a new perspective for understanding what ordinary Chinese went through their entire life.

Standing in line at the train station where thousands of people are, you know, all jammed. And nobody was actually standing in line, just a mob. It was... I was thinking, it's like just all these people who live here all live like this all the time. And I'm just a visitor and it's hard for me. But these people lived their whole life and they don't know anything else. It was, yeah, it did change my perspective. (Interview with Leong)

Journalists say living abroad has helped them to be more compassionate about humanity.

I think maybe I guess, especially working on this book about values, faiths, you see a lot of commonalities among people more than differences. A lot are the same desires, the same worries that people have about what makes a good life, how to live a good life, how to be a good person? These are all universal concerns. And I think well when I first read about you know Chinese people talk all the time about the moral crisis in China. And I think there's really... There is a search for stuff. I don't think China is an immoral place. I just think it's a place for people have always historically, going back to Confucius, the great thinkers to think about what's a good way to live life. A good life in a sense of a proper life, not just succeeding in a narrow sense, having money and stuff like that. And I think these are the things that people are still concerned with. And I think this is a similar point between China and America actually. Cause Americans are always worried about crisis of values, you know, we are becoming immoral or this and that or whatever. And I think it's amazing how similar the two countries are in that sense. (Interview with Johnson)

They also start to appreciate the aspects of Chinese culture that are missing in their own culture such as the Chinese emphasis on family, home and taking care of the elderly.

My parents are divorced. My family is kinda scattered all over the place. That you know, I know so many Chinese about your age (in their 20's) actually who graduated from school and they are in Beijing and they got a pretty good job and their career is gonna develop nicely. And they leave Beijing and move to Chengdu because their parents are in Chengdu and they are getting old. And they want to go back. They are kind of ready to sacrifice a pretty good career in the capital to be close to their aging parents. I would not make that decision. And I don't think most people will. And now that my father is getting older. I'm trying to figure out how I can spend a lot more time in Philadelphia. One of the reasons that I feel that way is because I see how Chinese are. I appreciate that. And I want to use that sort of as a model. (Interview with Forney)

Not all cultural influence is positive though. Coming from the small town Orillia in southern Ontario, Canada, Hawke said he has become more calculating and less trusting.

So I think I've become more calculating when I'm dealing with people. I'm less trusting. I think I'm a little bit more savvy when it comes to making deals with people. I think I'm very conscious about what's in it for me, what's in it for you. I think I'm a little bit more willing to play hardball with people and call them on stuff. (Interview with Hawke)

The air pollution, the most visible but not the only pollution, affects peoples' physical and mental health. Hawke said he never imagined he would be forced to move out of Beijing because of the pollution when he first arrived in 2007. At that time, he thought a social movement was brewing. He stayed to see what he thought was the Chinese version of the American 60s coming true. He later learned he had misread China and "what I wanted the Chinese people to want for themselves is not what they wanted."

When he worked as a journalist, Hawke hoped to build a bridge for mutual understanding to foster empathy, a goal shared by some other journalists.

The majority of journalists identify themselves as observers. It took Farrar some time to learn how to observe. One of Farrar's regrets is she did not take full advantage of her time working for the state-owned media *China Daily*.

"I think I was too young then and too sort of passionate about Western journalism to try to be an ethnographer in a sense," she said. She regrets getting too emotional about a story being censored. If she had bitten her tongue and held back her anger about what she considered unethical journalism, she could have had material to write about how Chinese state-media functions.

"Journalism is education," *New York Times* Shanghai Bureau Chief David Barboza said. His goal is not to leave China thinking his stories got Chinese to improve human rights. His job, he said, is to write good, honest, fair stories, educate people and find the truth.

The label of an outsider is a role forced upon journalists with foreign faces whether they like it or not. Journalists take its impact differently. To have the distance to observe as an outsider is healthy for journalists like Johnson.

So I think even if I wanted to be like Chinese, I could never be Chinese. I could never work like... Maybe it's possible if you stayed in the United States for a while and you could naturalize and then if you were in big cities, you walk down the street, nobody would notice you. You could be completely anonymous. Maybe if you were in a small town, it would be different. But in China, you will never realize that for me. So I'm always reminded that I would be an outsider. So I think as, it puts you into this role as an observer. Some people, you know, some people... There can be a very negative dynamic when people don't really like being in China. They feel there's a lot of problems. But they also feel there's nothing else they can do. They are kinda trapped. Maybe you don't think of it in such black-and-white terms as I just described. But there are people who you wonder why are you writing on this place when you so clearly don't like it or when you are you know having such a bad time here. They are always complaining about the air pollution, all these things, people being rude or whatever. So I think sometimes being in a place long-term, you have to keep, you have to kind of maybe keep some distance. I think it's healthy. Healthy if you keep a distance. (Interview with Johnson)

For other journalists like Farrar, she said she has never been in a country before where the notion of a foreigner and an outsider is so pronounced. Feeling like the perpetual outsider is one of the reasons why she plans to leave China soon.

Some journalists see themselves as storytellers and recorders. When Leong first came to China on June 5, 1989, he never intended to be a documentary photographer. He never thought his photos would later become historical records.

At that time, I thought oh it's always, people are always gonna wear the same color of clothes and ride these bicycles, and live in this kind of just this kind of drab life for you to have the same job and you are assigned a job and just kinda stuck forever. I didn't think I was gonna meet someone like you you know who can easily travel anywhere around the world for education. I didn't think that was gonna happen like that. So I thought you know when I was taking the pictures, okay, these are the pictures. But it's not like it's gonna change that much. Look at the pictures now, you cannot even find anything like that anymore. I mean I was... I didn't expect it to become this historical record. But that's what it is, for better or worse. That's what it became... The truth is I was preserving things, I was reporting things, I was getting stuff down that some people in the future could look back that how we used to. We don't do that anymore but that's what happened. (Interview with Leong)

The concept of journalism is simple, said Tang, who graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism in 2000. She said one must try to make the story interesting, fair, accurate and objective. Tang said it is the practice of journalism that is difficult.

Regardless of how journalists see their roles, they strive to get as close to the truth as possible through different methods. Journalists admit they all have biases. But as professionals, they do not let their biases affect their reporting.

"I care about China," Tang said. "But that doesn't mean I do stories that are favorable to China."

## **Conclusion**

China is a country full of contradictions. The same contradictions exist in foreign journalists. As a highly self-critical profession, journalists know journalism is imperfect, and it has its limitations. In fact, that is one thing that has not changed since the time Johnson researched on foreign journalists in China for his college senior thesis three decades ago.