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

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By

DANDAN ZOU

Stacey Woelfel, Project Chair
Associate Professor | Director, Murray Center for Documentary Journalism

David Rees
Professor | Chair, Photojournalism Faculty

Steve Rice
Assistant Professor | Convergence Journalism

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Stacey Woelfel, Project Committee Chair

ABSTRACT

What it is like to be a foreign journalist in China? This is the central question this project tries to answer.

Through three micro-documentaries and eight in-depth interviews, this project tries to get a glimpse of foreign journalists’ lives reporting and living in China. Journalists speak of industry cutback, censorship and technology and their impact on working journalists in China as well as around the world.

The lessons journalists learned about life and the practice of journalism inform readers and future international correspondents the challenges of international reporting.
KEY WORDS

China-based, Foreign Journalists, International Reporting, Censorship, Journalism Ethics, Industry Cutback
Chapter One: Introduction

“From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer.” This is the first sentence George Orwell wrote in his essay “Why I Write.” And this sentence applies to my life just as accurately. I came to the Missouri School of Journalism with one ambition: to become a writer.

I had never thought of devoting my career into filmmaking. First, I had no experience with a DSLR until a year ago when I took Fundamentals of Photography. Second, I thought filmmaking was a profession for the Chinese rich whose financial resources allow them to invest a large amount of money in gear and film production. The idea of becoming a visual journalist simply never registered in my mind.

However, the idea to do a video project did not come out of the blue. Films have been my passion since the day I watched my first film in the dark theater with my classmates one Friday afternoon in elementary school. The films I have watched define who I am and what I believe in. Eisenstein’s “Battleship Potemkin” made me realize films are not movies that we watch to kill time with baskets of popcorn. Film is the most manipulating, persuasive art that challenges our core values in no more than three hours (most of the time). Buñuel’s “An Andalusian Dog” comes to mind as one example. I still remember the impulse to turn my eyes away from the screen when seeing the blade slide across the actress’ eyeball and my resentment of watching a film named after a dog without seeing any sign of a dog! I was angry and felt violated. I was determined to attack the film director if I ever see him for presenting me a film that does not make any sense! But I think I will end up hugging him after the initial attack for forcing me to be in touch with my subconscious emotions. I will tell him I felt vulnerable and insecure in that
moment and I circled my arms around my body to make myself feel less lonely. I also
want to thank him for forcing me to feel my own existence and the excitement to be alive.

I had thought of becoming a film critic someday. I was 24 at the time and
believed it was too late for me to have anything to do with filmmaking. I needed to think
pragmatically in terms of how to make a living. I tried the Fundamentals of Photography
class out of my intention to locate a better job after graduation. I was told reporters are
expected to take photos and videos these days. So I set out to prepare myself to be a more
hirable writer. And this is what I will forever be grateful for my journalism school
education: it made me believe I am capable of anything I aspire to do. My Chinese
upbringing has taught me to be realistic and calculating in every step I make. What do I
benefit from doing this? What is the investment and return? The first thing I did after
thinking of making a series of micro-docs is to call my friend Shelly Yang, who was a
year senior than me and was about to finish her own micro-doc project. I asked her if she
thought I was wasting my time thinking about producing something I had no experience
in. I expected her or someone else to tell me to reconsider this idea because I had no
experience in making videos. I took one class and made two awful micro-docs. That was
it. I was hoping to hear someone telling me I am chewing something too big to bite. Then
I will go back to my original plan and happily start research narrative writing, a project
that has been done repeatedly in the past few years. What I heard was all encouragement.
The school environment is too nurturing to let me say “no” to myself.

I made my decision to make micro-docs before I knew my topic. But the topic
came easily. With no exaggeration, I was struggling the first day I came to the U.S. I had
a clear goal, which was to get my education in journalism. But I was struggling to make
sense of my experience as a Chinese living abroad. My first four months at MSJ was mostly spent in Missourian’s newsroom. My language could not keep up with my thoughts and my ignorance of literally everything makes it extremely difficult for me to report in a highly competitive newsroom. What hurts me the most is I did not know how to write. How was I supposed to become a writer if I could not even write one coherent sentence without thinking twice? It was a huge blow to my self-esteem, and I lost confidence. I started to question my ability to make a living as a journalist. Once I sat on the curvy bench in RJI right by the café and had an anxiety attack. My mind went black, and I lost track of why I was there.

One of my favorite writers, Milan Kundera, once wrote something like living abroad is like walking on cotton candy. It feels unreal. Do other people feel the same way I do or totally different? I wanted to know their experiences of living abroad. The news I consume most is Western coverage of China. It was a natural question to ask how are these articles and videos I consumed produced? How does someone report in a country like China where I lived for 21 years?

I still want to be a writer. I also want to be a documentary filmmaker someday. This project has prepared me the skills and techniques to shoot and edit videos, but also equipped me with the life lesson that will serve me my whole life.
Chapter Two: Weekly Reports

My project can be divided into three phases. The first one is building contact, which is between the end of May to the end of June. The second one is shooting, which lasted till early September. The last one is the post-production from September to early November.

Weekly Report One: May 31, 2014

I can’t remember the details. But the skeleton of the story goes like this. A reporter in Orlando, Fla., took on a project to find stories not related to Disney World. Later, he received awards for his project that turned out to be a big success. One reporter asked him what was the most difficult part of the project. His answer was to get out of the car.

I once asked David Barboza things he disliked about being a journalist. He answered: “torturous writing, long hours and begging people for interviews.”

Asking people for favors is never my favorite part of journalism, and it turned out to take more mental energy than I anticipated. I can’t remember how many emails I have sent out this week alone asking for favors. I’ve sent emails to U.S. journalists living in China or elsewhere, asking if they would be interested in working with me on my project, or if they know anyone who might be a good fit for my project. I’ve sent emails to organizations such as the Foreign Correspondents Club located in Beijing to ask for directions. They answered they would include my request in their weekly email to their members. And that’s almost the best email I’ve received so far.
Each morning, I wake up and start searching the Internet to look for possible subjects. For the past week, what I did was look through ChinaFile’s 11 contributors pages, reading all the bios and emailing those who I think would be a good fit for my project. Most journalists didn’t reply. One photographer replied but said he’s not conformable being filmed. I started to dread the process and had to make it an assignment to force myself to find at least one potential subject a day.

At first, I stick strictly to U.S. journalists in Shanghai. Then I broadened my search term to foreign journalists based in Shanghai, Beijing and Chengdu.

So far, I have one subject who agrees to work with me. She is a freelancer based in Shanghai and I will meet her in person on the week of June 9 when I arrive in Shanghai. I also have a positive reply from a female photographer located in Beijing. She grew up in Singapore and does freelance work for the New York Times and other major U.S. publications. I enjoyed her work a lot, and she is of Chinese descent. I also found a food writer based in Chengdu, also a Chinese American. She hasn’t responded to my email yet.

Maybe it’s a coincidence that mostly female journalists responded to my email. Or it might be my subconscious choice of contacting more female journalists than male ones because I feel more comfortable with female journalists? So I counted. I contacted three male and four female journalists. Since I only follow three journalists, the chance for all of them to be female is not low.

For the documentary component, I wonder if I could narrow the project down to female foreign journalists working in China? (The research component could still be U.S.
journalists. It’s a lot easier to find experienced U.S. journalists who worked extensively in China.) Please let me know what you all think. Frankly, I still want to find at least one male journalist if time permits. But emailing is not the best way to persuade people to commit a large chunk of their time to my project. If I end up having three female journalists who agree to work with me, should I go ahead and narrow down the micro-doc project?

The Beijing-based photographer who rejected my request to film him said he would be happy to talk. I consider him one of the eight journalists I will interview for my research component. As a Chinese American, he has been in China since 1988. Also, I’ve found a few prominent journalists who spent a considerable amount of the time in China. I listed them as potential contacts for my research part.

My plan for next week would be to keep looking for micro-doc subjects and get the eight possible contacts for interviews ready. I’m still going over the details with the Singapore photographer for now.

Since I’m basically searching the Internet for subjects, what I found are mostly established journalists with impressive portfolios. I do want to follow someone green who just went to China and started his or her journalism career recently. I will go to the events held by the Foreign Correspondents Club and see if I could find anyone there when I get to Shanghai. I also plan to visit Beijing in mid-June to meet some Beijing-based journalists. I’m not sure if there are private clubs or circles among Shanghai or Beijing-based journalists. This is something I will find out when I get to China.
Weekly Report Two: June 6

I’m happy to report some progress this week. I’ve got in touch with some journalists and learned a lot over the past week. For those who replied my emails (about 75 percent response rate), all journalists are patient enough to answer my questions and explain their situations. They are not only encouraging enough to help me with the project, but also kind enough to introduce me to other journalists. Although some of them declined to be filmed for reasons I will explain later in this report, it is quite pleasant to chat with them just through emails. (One even encouraged me to write for them.)

When I started the first round of request, I asked them directly if I could follow them around for three weeks for the micro-documentary. I’m not sure if the outcome would have been different if I asked them in person. I don’t think so. But that’s just my own opinion, and I could be wrong. I don’t think journalists are easily persuaded especially when they have solid reasons to do or not to do something. I’ve had experience with sources who changed their minds in the middle of the process because they didn’t know what I need for the story to work. So I wanted to be upfront about what I need and how my process works. I have no time to waste, and I was eager to find the other two subjects before I head back to China. But I guess it is hard to convince people through emails.

Here are some excerpts of my correspondence with one photographer. After reading a brief introduction of my project, she asked what she needed to do and how the materials would be used.

Request - “Thanks so much for your reply. This project is my master's project, so it will be shown in MSJ's library system. Also, I will pitch the project to several
publications such as Global Journalist, which is an online magazine devoted to the coverage of international issues. The magazine is owned by Missouri School of Journalism. Depending on how the project goes, I might pitch the project to other publications as well. In total, I will produce three 4-5-minute micro-documentaries featuring three journalists working in China.

I'd like to follow you over a period of time between the months of June and September. For example, I would like to film a few days in June and then follow up with a few days in July and August. It depends on your schedule of course. In total, it would be around three weeks of filming. I don't film all day. And of course it will depend on how comfortable you are and what you are fine with me filming. I'd also like to interview you two times, each for about an hour and a half. I understand I'm asking a big commitment from you. I will go to Beijing in mid-June. I'd love to meet you in person and go over the details. I really like your work, and I'm very interested in your story as a journalist with Chinese descent working in Beijing.” (June 1)

Reply - “Thanks for your interest. I understand what you need but I think it is really not going to work for me to be shadowed that much. I’ve had a crew follow me for a documentary for a week and it is impossible to work that way.” (June 1)

She later explained that she does intimate and investigative work, and therefore it is impossible to be followed.

The second reason journalists refused to be followed is because they don’t want to attract any attention. Some of them have done reporting while operating in gray space. One journalist said he was once accused of being a spy by local government.

Third, some personally don’t feel comfortable being filmed.
This is discouraging news to swallow. On one hand, my project will not be representative without touching on how journalists work under censorship. However, like one foreign reporter said, the hardest job was to protect sources. I cannot ask journalists to take risks for my master’s project. Also, I don’t think I’m ready to take on such an assignment either. For the past week, I’ve been thinking maybe my choice left is to follow journalists who cover culture, entertainment, food and travel — the soft pieces. Not that they are not important, but I want one of my subjects to be an investigative journalist. Certainly it is too early to give up on that now. However, given that I only have three months, it is important to keep in mind that I have to get the project done and go with what I have.

There’s one last thing I want to mention regarding subjects. When I research, I frequently ask myself if it is necessary to broaden the term U.S. journalist to foreign journalists? Like I mentioned in the first report, if I end up with three female journalists, could that work? That comes with a similar question, what if I find one from U.K.? What if all my subjects turn out to be writers? Or freelance writers? Due to my own background as a writer before I picked up a camera and my training in Magazine Writing at MSJ, I found myself more willing to contact writers. Another reason is that I find it intimidating to ask seasoned photographers or videographers. If I were an experienced photographer, I won’t let a young student who has not much camera experience to film me. Maybe I’m wrong? But why should they trust me? I would appreciate your advice on this. Thanks.

I want to thank David for introducing me the Melissa Farlow method. I’m sending out the second round of requests and phrasing the requests differently. I told them what
my project is, how I found them and my interest in hearing their stories. In the following emails, I usually schedule a meeting and plan to ask them about the possibility of becoming my subject during the meeting. Like David mentioned, it also gives me a chance to see if the person is a good fit for my project.

The good news is that I’ve got in touch with a Chengdu-based freelance writer and will meet him the day after I arrive in Shanghai. When I read his article on house demolition in the countryside of Chengdu, it broke my heart. Reading his personal story on how he almost froze to death in the cold winter of 2007 was quite inspiring. It reminds me the purpose of my project. His story is the story I want to tell, the story of a young man who goes across the ocean in hope to find something but ends up in a cold, run-down house with no family, no friends and no money. Personally, I relate to his experience because we also lived through some common events such as the 2008 earthquake and the Olympics. Even if he doesn’t want to be filmed, he might introduce me to other journalists in Chengdu. I’m so dedicated to finding one subject in Chengdu not only because it is my hometown, but also because I believe journalists in Chengdu have a very different story compared to their peers on the coast.

I will visit Beijing very likely in the following week and meet three journalists I have set up meetings with.

To-do List on the week of June 8 to 14

• Continue to look for subjects. I give myself two weeks to locate my second subject.

• Prepare and rephrase the questions for the research component. I will send the questions to you soon.
• I will meet my first subject who agreed to work with me. I will get to know her better and go over filming details with her.

• I will meet the Chengdu-based freelance writer while he visits Shanghai on June 10.

• Go to Foreign Correspondents Club based in Shanghai and see what happens there.

• Practice filming in Shanghai.

A few things to mention:

• I won’t be able to log in Wordpress, Vimeo or YouTube while I’m in China. I will upload rough edits on a Chinese site Youku, which is similar to YouTube. I will email you word document for weekly reports.

• I don’t feel comfortable naming my subjects for the micro-docs in the report yet. One reason is I don’t want their names shown up on any type of search engine. The second reason is that any of my subjects could change their mind, and I think it’s best not to identify their names until I finish filming. I will write clearly to make sure you know whom I’m referring to. I hope this doesn’t bother you. But if it does, please let me know.

• Please let me know if I should have done anything differently or start a new strategy in approaching journalists. Thanks.

**Weekly Report Three: June 12**

I’ve settled down in Shanghai this week. My friend’s apartment is not far from the street, and I was woken up each day by the noise of the traffic, cars honking, trucks driving by, birds chirping and the loud music from seniors who exercise on public
squares early in the morning. I didn’t know how I ignored the noise when growing up. Maybe I have internalized it to an extent I stopped hearing them. But it seems hard for me to not notice the blaring music from stores on the street and loud conversation people have on subways. For some reason, the noise, the sweat in the air and the long commute time to get anywhere in a city like Shanghai consumed a lot of my physical and mental energy. My three days back home reminded me of my interview with National Geographic Photographer Fritz Hoffmann. He mentioned it was the weird energy bustling on the street of Shanghai that convinced him to stay. I can see why now.

The night when I arrived in Shanghai, I got in a taxi to meet a journalist who I plan to ask to be my subject at midnight. He had a plane to catch at 8 o’clock the next morning but still agreed to stay up to meet me. He started working in Chengdu 10 years ago. And his ten years of staying in a city that is famous for its laid-back attitude and emphasis on quality of life has apparently shaped him. He was drinking a beer when I got off the taxi. He said he shaved before he left Chengdu, but his beard gave me the impression that he just climbed mountain Everest. When the waiter came up to tell us that the bar was about to close. He answered in a typical way any local Chengduness would say: take it easy, and let me finish this drink.

I “interrogated” him about his background, what brought him to China, and Chengdu specifically, where he learned the Sichuan dialect, how he makes a living as a freelancer. He grew up in Germany and moved to New York when he was a teenager. He dropped out of journalism school at the University of Minnesota because he doesn’t like to be trained as the typical reporter. He has written for the Economist, Vice and the Anthill. He has two children, obviously with a Chinese woman, whom he no longer sees.
On November 8, he would be 37 years old. Those are some of the facts I gathered. He has a tattoo in Korean characters on his chest meaning struggles. But all that doesn’t tell me much about this person and help me understand how he comes to produce the beautiful articles I read beforehand. He is not hiding the fact that he’s not like most clean-cut journalists who dress up “professionally” and report in a certain way. I get the idea that he’s not the type of journalist we see reporting for CNN or NPR. What makes him an interesting subject to me is because he’s the only foreign journalist based in Chengdu. When I was an intern at a newspaper in Chengdu, I learned that only journalists with no ambition stay in Chengdu. The city doesn’t have the best media environment for young journalists to develop and make a career. Then what kept him staying in Chengdu for about a decade?

He told me that he’s working on a martial arts project and will go to Chongqing to report in the first week of July. He was kind enough to tell me that I would have more than enough b-rolls for my project with his martial arts research. And needless to say Chongqing is a super visual city that will present visual variety. (This is why I love working with journalists. They always think about how you get your work done for you.) I was surprised how much access he gives me. He said I could follow him whenever I want to, and I could sleep in his apartment as long as I feel comfortable. Basically he’s saying I could do whatever I want. This message really helped me to relax. I was anxious about whether he would agree to be followed, then how much access I could get, and finally how much control he wants to have over the final product. I haven’t talk to him in details such as can I film his kids and maybe his ex-wife/girlfriend. But right now it
seems like he’s very cooperative and gives me enough trust to let me film whatever I want to.

Right now I’m in the process of storyboard his story. I say storyboard, but it’s more like preparation to get storyboarding started. I don’t know what the story is. But I think it would be interesting to follow him through his martial arts project. I read an article he wrote where he compared how Germany and China treated the martial spirits. I could see that his interest in martial arts ties back to his background and identity.

I can’t wait to start filming. Of course I’m still in the process of searching for my final subject. With my final subject, I’m not sure what type of journalist I’m looking for exactly. I know I want someone who’s very different from the two subjects I have now. The one I have in mind is someone who just arrived in China and still tries to figure out how to navigate through the society.

Another phenomenon I want to mention from my observation is that many male foreign journalists date/marry Chinese women. I’m not sure if female journalists date Chinese men. Although I’ve read enough literature on how Asian women could be seeing attractive in the eyes of white men, I think it is too early for me to make any assumption. It is funny though my Chengdu-based subject told me bluntly that he learned his Sichuan dialect from chasing girls. Some could say this is a way to blend in. But who could deny love happens anywhere right? How could we put a label on such a relationship? But this is something I think I will discuss with foreign journalists in the later stage of my project.

**Weekly Report Four: June 20**

I was hoping to make some real progress this week by starting shooting. But like how journalism goes, it never follows a plan and something always goes wrong. When
my first subject didn’t reply my email last Saturday, I had a hunch that the planned shooting on Monday would not happen. It turned out my subject was sick. It was not serious, but that added another layer of stress to her schedule. She’s working on a big project, and she emphasized that it is very important for her career. She said she’s happy to help me, but the timing isn’t right. Then she told me that we could arrange something after she comes back from her vacation at the end of July.

There’s nothing I could say except to keep looking for more potential subjects. I spent the first half of the week freaking out on why nobody replies my email. That pushed me to think how I put myself in this situation to begin with. First of all, I underestimated the time investment to find the right subjects. Also, I might scared off some journalists by not explicitly explaining what “following” means. I really want to spend three weeks and build intimacy with my subjects. I worry my micro-docs would turn out to be shallow pieces that only scratch the surface of journalists’ life in China.

I was very anxious because I’m falling behind my schedule and I fear I won’t get the project done on time. Three months go by so fast. Of course this is part of the lesson. Things don’t always come smoothly as planned. But if I’m only left with two months to shoot, is that the end of the world? How long do I need to produce a good video story? No one can give a definite answer. But there’s more than one way to tell a story. Maybe I shouldn’t set out thinking I need to be close enough that my subject would allow me to be there when he or she wakes up. Maybe that’s not the story. In the end, you need to work with what you have.

I sent eight emails this week, and then started the phase I hate — wait for responses. Robert De Niro forced himself to go to auditions, knowing he would not get
the part. You just have to keep trying, hang in there, he said in an interview with Jon Stewart. And that was the anecdote I used to cheer myself up to continue sending out emails.

Things finally started to turn around on Thursday morning. A British photographer agreed to work with me over coffee. Before I go on, I’d like to explain why I widened my search term from U.S. journalists to western journalists. I’m working on a tight time frame, and I really need to start shooting as soon as possible. I know my proposal said specifically U.S. journalists. But widening the search term gives me more options. The proposal’s literature review of the project part mostly covered foreign journalists’ situation in China, not just U.S. journalists. So I’d like to ask your permission to widen the video project to western journalists. If I do this, should I also do the same with my eight subjects for the research part? Should I look for a Germane or French journalist as my third subject then?

Here’s my favorite photo essay from the photographer’s work:

http://www.archive.jonbrowning.co.uk/#!/portfolio/G0000ILNSXFR5Gzw (I enjoyed this story a lot. I’m sure you will too.)

Unlike my first subject who grew tired of Shanghai and journalism, he is enjoying himself in Shanghai. He finally got paid to do what he likes — being a photojournalist. He studied photojournalism in UK. He tried several internships. But the competition among photojournalists in UK is so fierce that he wanted to try a different route as a starter. His ex-girlfriend and he figured they had not gone to Asia, so they picked China. He first came to work as an English teacher. He started to take photos and built up his portfolio. Then he got in touch with editors in Europe to freelance. That’s how he got
started. I told him I really enjoyed his work because it showed a China I don’t see. He answered that he thought some of the best photographers back in UK are foreigners. It is because they see things differently, he said. And maybe that is why, as a foreigner, his photos seem refreshing to me. Anyway, his story probably represents a large part of the demographic as what brought journalists to China, not just the curiosity I imagined when I first started this project, but more importantly, the opportunity.

He was frank and a bit shy (maybe too shy to reject my quest). He emphasized that he’s not a very eloquent person. This does make him different in a group of expressive and egocentric people. Maybe this is why I enjoyed his work so much. The photographer disappeared in his photos. I could tell that he’s passionate about photography. He mentioned that he doesn’t like event reporting. He prefers to go to the place and get to know the people. He also has his own standard of ethics. He didn’t want to pitch the migrant worker story to a media publication because he photographed the subject in a different factory. The factory where the subject works at wouldn’t allow him to photograph. So they tried a different factory for the shoot, though the subject was doing the same thing.

He doesn’t want me to follow him to Lanzhou where he would go with a writer for a Der Spiegel project. He thinks it makes him look unprofessional to have me follow him while he’s working. I proposed to film him on a small assignment. He doesn’t have any at this moment, but he said he would let me know when he has something like that. For now, I said I’d like to film his personal life since he’s not that busy with work. I told him I’d like to shoot more intensively for the following two weeks. Then I might film more for special occasions later. He’s working on his personal project, which is to
document life along the Huangpu River in Shanghai. It could be portraits of people in small villages along the river or landscape. That sounds like an awesome project to me. He’s also sharing an apartment with his Chinese girlfriend. If she’s comfortable, I’d like to include her in the video as well.

One last note, I have got in touch with two American journalists who are taking vacation in the U.S. now. I will follow up with them when they come back at the end of June.

Things to do in the week of June 23-29

• Start filming the British photographer
• Continue to look for subjects
• Build up contacts for research

Weekly Report Five: June 28

I have some good news to report. I finally started filming this week! And it feels wonderful to be out reporting. It makes me feel all the anxiety and hard work earlier had finally paid off.

I filmed Jon when he organized his photos (put them in archives, write captions, etc.), swim and worked on his personal project. The archiving process was quite and repetitive. He thinks it’s boring. I stayed for about four hours in the morning. It was a good practice for me because I have enough time to try different things in a controlled environment.

It is a whole different story when he went out to work on his personal project. His personal project is to take portraits/landscape photos along the Huangpu River, from where it starts to where it ends in Shanghai. The Huangpu River circles through Shanghai
from the suburb area to downtown and goes into the ocean. He has got some photos of what he called “the rich people” along the bund, and now he’s photographing the suburb areas on the edge of Shanghai. It is a really cool project. You get to see how different people’s lives are within 50 miles. I was quite excited about this short trip. And it turned out to be one of my best journalism experiences ever.

It has been raining for half of a week in Shanghai. I was surprised that he still wanted to go when it was pouring rain that afternoon. Jon explained he wanted to photograph people along the river through all seasons and under all kinds of conditions. So off we went. Twenty minutes later, he got off the car to photograph two topless middle-aged men standing in a big truck. The moment I got off the car and take out my camera, I saw the two men immediately squat and sank into the truck where I couldn’t see them. I wasn’t sure if they were avoiding my camera or Jon’s, or both. Jon was asking their permission to photograph. They kept asking him what was the purpose of the photo. I kept my camera low and didn’t film because I was concerned that my camera would scare the two workers even more. And here’s the dilemma. As suspicious as most Chinese are toward cameras, I know how difficult it is to get people to agree to be photographed. Could the presence of my camera make my subject’s work more difficult? Am I interrupting, instead of documenting what’s happening? I explained to the workers on the truck that I will not film them and pointed my camera at Jon. He’s moving fast, and I was trying to stay close but also not to get in his way or his frame. Eventually they said no photos. Jon walked away. The sad part is I didn’t get the footage of the workers saying no and the shot of Jon when he heard the answer. Of course I have a lot of excuses
that could explain why I didn’t get the shots. I should have thought about the situation before the trip.

Then he drove into a construction site where the ground was covered by mud. The rain got heavier. The construction site was right off the river. I followed him to get inside the construction site. My left hand was holding an umbrella and my right arm holding the camera with the help of the shoulder gig Steve lent me. My shoes were certainly not prepared for this kind of journalism and were destroyed after this trip. I felt like I were the superwoman running up and down to keep up with Jon while filming in the rain. I got some great footage. I also made a ton of mistakes.

First of all, I didn’t mic him because I brought my Zoom recorder and thought it would be good enough to record him working in the field. Most of the audio recorded in the car was ok. But the audio recorded in the rain and the wind was not. I can hear what he says but the viewers would probably get confused. One solution to this is to add subtitles. He was speaking Mandarin, so subtitles would be necessary any way. But it would certainly be nice to hear him talking to the workers at the scene.

Secondly, I have some wide and medium shots of Jon walking in the mud and trying to convince people to let him photograph them. But I don’t have nearly enough tight shots. I don’t mean to find excuses for my mistakes. But he was moving so fast. And I was trying to catch up with him and film while trying not to slip and fall onto the mud. When things happened so fast, it was really difficult to adjust the exposure and keep everything in focus while one of my hands is holding an umbrella. And of course some of the footage was a bit shaky, especially when I was walking while filming.
Thirdly, I forgot to film when he went back to the car to write down his subjects’ names. I was behind him to get inside the car. Then I was trying to fold the umbrella as it was dripping water in the car. When I was ready to film, he already finished writing. This happened twice. So I should have been prepared at least to get that the second time.

I will cut a rough edit of this trip and put it on Vimeo. I would appreciate it if you could give me some advice on shooting techniques working in such condition and editing this piece. I think I will include this trip in the final piece, maybe for one minute. It is visually interesting, and it really shows how those great portraits we see on magazines are produced.

Jon will go to Hebei to photograph a Mao commune group with another German journalism for Der Spiegel possibly on a weekend in July. I will follow him on this assignment. I really look forward to that because it would give me a sense of how he really works (how he works with a writer and approach his subjects when on assignment, which is different than working for his personal project).

I haven’t done the interview with Jon yet. Jon is definitely a great photojournalist. But as he told me earlier, he’s not very eloquent, especially in front of a camera. I asked him questions casually. He didn’t really give me much of an answer. I’m not sure how much I would get from the interview. I think I need to be more prepared with my questions to go deep with him. Right now I’m thinking about doing the interview after the Hebei trip. He will be more relaxed with me and I would know him better to know what to ask. Please let me know if you think I should take a different approach.

I think Jon’s piece is gonna be more about how he practices journalism and his work rather than his personal life/transformation. He’s frank with me. He also sets clear
boundary as what I cannot film. He basically limits it to his work, which is fine. I was looking for some emotional investment from the journalist and was hoping to dig more on individual change, but I don’t think this will be in this piece.

My other subject Lara just went back to the U.S. for a three-week vacation. She said we could arrange something when she comes back. I’m keeping in touch with Jon and trying to figure out if I could film more of his work and personal life this week. I’ve sent out some more requests this week. Except making a few more friends on LinkedIn, I haven’t heard back from anyone yet. I will keep looking for my third subject. Since I won’t film one person everyday, it would be helpful to film two or even three person at the same time.

Since it has been slow since I come back, I think I will start to work more intensively on the research part. Here also included the research questions. Please let me know what you think. Thanks.

To-do-list on the week of June 30 to July 6

- Continue looking for subjects
- Continue filming the photographer
- Get in touch with journalists for research interviews
- Review and edit the field trip

Weekly Report Six: July 5

I have to say it surprised me how difficult it was to find the right subjects. After one month of many hours of researching, sending emails, rephrasing my requests and contemplating what the problem is and how to improve, I finally have all my three subjects lined up. My previous research tells me that there are more than 900 foreign
journalists working in China. I couldn’t understand why it took me so long to find three
fit for my project?

Earlier this week, I’ve had my share of worries debating if I should come to
Beijing. It was a big investment in terms of my budget and time. After being rejected a
few times over emails, I developed a self-defense mechanism by anticipating that the
journalist will not agree to work with me. However, after hearing out your opinion and
five hours of train-ride, I arrived in Beijing.

The heavy air pollution and super-crowded subway (which is unbelievable
because I thought I’ve experienced the worst in Shanghai) doesn’t make Beijing
particularly welcoming.

The night I arrived at Beijing, a British writer invited me for beer at a local bar
close to his apartment. He lived in a small valley (“hutong”), and I found the bar next to a
public bathhouse. It is the place for those who don’t have private bathroom at home to
take showers. I stood outside and watched the owner walking around in the lobby. I heard
the sound of water splashing on the ground and felt like I saw the steam coming out of
the dark windows on the second floor. A piece of paper glued on the wall warns people
walking by that the outside of the wall could fall in any minute. The place reminded me
of the public bathhouse I used to go to in my hometown when I was little. Like many
migrant families, the apartment my family lived in didn’t have a private bathroom. That
was where I saw naked women taking showers and realized that every woman’s body
looked different. They always smiled at me and asked me where my mom was. It was
almost a surreal experience to see such a place still exists in Beijing in 2014. It must be
so much fun to be a foreign correspondent in China, I thought. China is full of places like this, waiting to be explored and discovered.

The next morning, I met Stuart, the bureau chief of Mcclatchy newspapers. He came to Beijing in January and found China fascinating for journalists (think about all the stories you could write!). He will start learning Mandarin intensively for the next two months with his wife, also a journalist. Maybe this is my Chinese thinking kicking in, I don’t know if I’d have the courage to learn a new language when I were 54. That’s a big commitment he takes to really understand the place he reports at. Unlike the journalists I talked to earlier who have been living in China for over five years, he is excited to go out and quite active in participating in all kinds of events. We talked about our schedules. I will follow him do grocery shopping at a local market and cook Sunday. I will also film him in his Mandarin class this week. I said I would like to follow him when he goes out to different events or places for traveling. He’s very interested in learning Chinese culture and look for stories along the way. So I think this could be a nice piece to delve into how foreign journalists try to adjust themselves into this new culture and society.

Here are three mini profiles of my three subjects to help you to get a better idea of who they are and what the story might be:

Stuart, 54, married, no children, a veteran journalist before coming to China, based in Beijing. After graduated from Columbia University, he covered environmental news and was the opinion writer/editor for Sacramento Bee. He worked in Japan for about a year and always thought he would like to work in another Asian country. He arrived in Beijing in January as the bureau chief of Mcclatchy newspapers. He’s active and excited about working in China. He enjoyed being surprised and challenged. He likes
to cook and builds a relationship with some Chinese vendors at the farmers’ market. He’s starting his mandarin training with his wife Monday. If the weather is nice in Beijing, he likes to spend the weekend travelling to nearby places. He is also a soccer fan and follows up the world cup closely. (FYI: Soccer is huge in China. People stay up till 4 a.m. to follow world cup games. A pleasant surprise for Stuart.) He told me if the Netherlands makes it to the final, I could film him wearing an orange shirt chanting for the Dutch team at 4 a.m. at a bar. This is encouraging news since I’m a fan of the Netherlands as well. I’m glad we are supporting the same team!

Jon, 30, dates a Chinese woman who’s a fashion designer, freelance photographer, based in Shanghai. Graduated with a degree in photojournalism, he chose to come to China to make a living as a photojournalist partly because of the fierce competition in UK. He came to China in 2007 and started as an English teacher. He started to build his portfolio during his first year and now takes assignments from Der Spiegel and other European publications. He seems to live comfortably in Shanghai and enjoys being a photojournalist in China. Also, he speaks good Mandarin (this is what his subjects say).

Lara, (I’m not sure about her age, I would guess 30), freelance writer, based in Shanghai. She came to China in 2008 and studied at Fudan University. Later, she taught news writing at Fudan University and writes for the New York Times, CNN and other U.S. publications. She is uncertain about her next steps career-wise. She grew tired of working in China and is considering moving back to U.S. She might also move to Beijing.

So far, I filmed Jon when he works at home and goes out to work on his personal project. I plan to spend two weeks in Beijing to hang out with Stuart. Since Jon leaves for England in early August, I need to go back to Shanghai to finish shooting in late July. I
might come back to Beijing sometime in August if Stuart is doing something I’m interested in filming. Luckily I’ve found a friend who I could stay with, so traveling to Beijing wouldn’t be as much a hassle. I will film Lara when she comes back in August in Shanghai. So now I have three subjects ready for my project. They each represent certain parts of life foreign journalists live in China. I’m still contacting more journalists in case any piece I plan here falls through.

I also interviewed a journalist based in Hong Kong for my research component. He has been in China for over ten years. I will have a follow-up interview with him later next week.

**Weekly Report Seven: July 11**

After the first month of anxious waiting, I’m finally starting to enjoy working on the project this week! There are a lot more journalists based in Beijing since most of the news agencies’ bureaus are here. That seems to explain why there are so many freelance journalists in Shanghai.

I had a wonderful time talking to the journalists in Beijing. I met a 27-year-old journalist who works for *Guardian*. Before that, he worked for *the New York Times* and *the Los Angeles Times*. His career path is a great example of China’s charm. If you are at the right place at the right time with the right skills (be able to speak Mandarin), you have all the luck you need. I also met a Mizzou grad. She grew up in China and graduated from in 2000. She worked for *Columbia Tribune* and another newspaper in Springfield, Missouri and moved back to Beijing two years ago. With a U.S. citizenship, she is able to work for AP now. She showed me around AP’s office in the Twin tower where you could see Beijing’s landmark IFC. She told me there are six print reporters and two
photographers. AP also produces content for TV. If I remember correctly, they have three
TV reporters/producers. That’s a small number for so much work in a massive country
like China. I forgot to mention Guardian only has two reporters in China. The McClatchy
has one. I would feel really lonely if I were the only journalist working in a foreign land.
Without a big staff such as the New York Times to commit huge amount of time and
resource, it is hard to consistently produce high quality work.

I also met a Canadian journalist who told me he has given up on journalism. His
next step is to move to a small town in Yunnan and pursue a career in music. He has a
wonderful story. Once a newspaper delivery boy in a small town in southern Ontario, he
didn’t want to become a journalist until he accidentally witnessed the downfall of the
Berlin Wall. He stayed in China because he wanted to witness the extreme change he had
predicted when he first came in 2004. But what he had predicted didn’t happen. On the
country, it went the opposite direction. And he found that just as fascinating. He finally
decided to give up journalism for various reasons. And the number one reason is that he
doesn’t think one can practice journalism in China. He might represent a large group of
both Chinese journalists and foreign journalists who eventually leave journalism exactly
because they loved what they do. (You will read more about his story when I finish
transcribing the interview.) When I asked him what his experience was like to teach in
the Communication University (one of the best schools in China; some even say they
have the best journalism school in China). He said except for five or six students, he
generally found students selfish, materialistic, egocentric and disappointing. I was quite
surprised how frank he was with me.
Another thing I found interesting is the love/hate relationship journalists have with China. I always ask them why they stay here after they complain about the air pollution and how hard it is to get people to talk to them. They look at me with the kind of disbelief as why I would ask that question. Later I understand China is not only the land of opportunities and stories; it is also exciting in its own way. You could have a really bad day in Beijing. The air pollution just reached a new high, and you got sick because of it; later people were being very rude and you were pushed out of the subway in the morning; you were thinking why don’t you just leave. Then you will have the best interview with someone for a story that could only happen in China. Before the night arrived, Beijing surprised you with a beautiful sunset and made you fall in love with the city again. (I attached some photos of Beijing’s sunset.)

When I was on the bus home one day, I suddenly started to understand why someone would live in a city that is almost uninhabitable. The temperature was about 90 that day, and I was all sweaty. Looking out of the window, I watched people going about their own business. For a journalist, what can be more exciting to witness the extreme amount of changes China is going through now? When I lived in the U.S., I hated driving. Not that I miss elbowing my way through the crowd in the subway, but I miss the people. When I am isolated in my car with the radio, I miss the people standing surrounding me and the drama that takes place everyday on a subway.

I finally realized why I chose this project. It was my curiosity that took me here. Another important reason is I miss China so much, and I want to understand China so badly. Growing up in a country doesn’t mean you understand her. I want to understand China as a journalist through the eyes of other journalists. Eventually this is a personal
project that deals with my own anxiety as a Chinese who got all her journalistic training from a U.S. journalism school.

The filming process with Stuart is going ok. Filming him do grocery shopping, cooking, watching world cup and taking Mandarin lessons is not as exciting as following the actual reporting. With Jon’s piece, you could see how he was rejected on the scene, and how frustrating that could be. But it’s hard to show the anxiety and stress Stuart undertakes when he studies Mandarin. I will interview him this weekend. If I ask the right questions, his answers might be a good way to narrate the entire piece. What I want this piece to convey is a sense of both excitement and anxiety. It was and probably continues to be an overwhelming experience for Stuart to get adjusted to living in Beijing. He mentioned how exciting it is that he could find stories anywhere. At the same time, it is exhausting trying to understand China and tiresome living here. Mandarin is a perfect example of how difficult it is to learn something that foreign and complicated. Stuart is a very nice person and goes out of his way to help me to film. Still, I don’t know how frank he will be with me during the interview.

I will go back to Shanghai next week to finish up shooting Jon’s piece. I will get the first draft of Jon’s story done by the beginning of August. I think I will need to come back to Beijing in August to film Stuart at least two more times. I want to film him practicing his Mandarin and going out to parks or rural areas in Beijing. He and his wife is an adventurous couple who try hard to blend in. I want to capture at least one of their adventures. He might go to Qingdao to work on a story. He agrees to let me follow him if he goes. It would be nice to see if his Mandarin lesson is actually working, and how he
reacts to the result in two or three weeks. Ideally I would wait till his lessons end in two month. Too bad I don’t have time for that.

**Weekly Report Eight: June 21**

This week is pretty slow. I spent much of my week sorting through my footage and transcribing. I’m also learning Audition, trying to fix the audio issue I emailed you all last week.

I was pretty mad at myself for making such a mistake. Every time I make a mistake, I remembered how Steve stressed that technique issue in class. Yes, it seems like I have to learn it the hard way. Now it is time to learn how to fix the problems created by my mistakes. The audio recorded from the camera through beachtek is not useable. And I would feel really foolish to go back to Stuart and ask him to do the interview again. Worst of all, I really like the interview. Stuart was quite frank and I have a lot of wonderful sound bites to tell his story. I don’t know if I will get the same answers if I ask him a second time. Luckily I have recorded the interview through the recorder separately. Although there’s some noise, I’m learning to get rid of it and make the sound cleaner. It still sounds pretty hollow now. I’m learning to fix that.

The filming process is pretty slow. Jon has been pretty busy since I came back to Shanghai and I only get a chance to interview him. The interview went ok. As I mentioned in previous reports, Jon is very quiet and I’m not sure how successful I was in asking the right questions. I’m going to work on editing Jon and Stuart’s piece in the following two weeks. So I still get a chance to get more if I need it. I will follow Jon one more time when he works on his personal project. He doesn’t work on it frequently and he’s leaving next week for England. So I only follow him twice. With Stuart’s story, I
will go to Beijing to spend a weekend or more to finish shooting in late August. I hope to see the effect of his intensive Mandarin training.

Lara will come back to Shanghai by the end of July. She needs to find a new apartment and move. It seems like she’s going through some changes now. She’s not sure about her schedule or where she will be yet. So I will probably wait and see what she decides eventually.

I’m thinking about going back home later this week. I will probably spend two weeks home. Since I’m staying with a friend, it’s a bit inconvenient to do the transcribing and editing because there’s no table per se for me to work at. Trying to find a quiet, cheap, comfortable place in Shanghai is not easy. If I were at home, I will have a much better environment (with a big table, a chair and a fan) to work at. I feel it is a good time now for me to slow down a bit, see what I have and how I should proceed. I want to ask your permission to temporarily stop the weekly report for two weeks since I won’t have much to report once I get home. I will do the same thing I did this week when I’m not hanging out with my family and friends: transcribe, sort out footage, watch Lynda and edit. I will probably have questions in terms of how to tell the story. But I’m not sure how you could help me if you don’t know much yet about these two journalists. So I think the best way is I edit a rough cut first and we could go from there.

Weekly Report Nine: August 19

Sorry for not being in touch for so long. Prof. Woelfel is absolutely right about how people fall into a relaxing zone at home. I slacked off pretty much all my three weeks at home. I regret it, but I also don’t regret it. I finally got a chance to read the books I’ve been longing to read and watch my favorite film director Akira Kurosawa’s
movies. And it was important, even necessary, for me to watch Kurosawa’s movies. They have shown me again the power of films/documentaries and have taught me never to lower my standards.

Except for my laziness, the reason I procrastinated so long is because I have no idea how to edit my stories. What I managed to finish was the transcription of my three interviews. Needless to say, what a painful process that was. But I’m glad I did it because I realized how much information I had not noticed during the interviews. After listening to the interviews multiple times, I understood my subjects’ words to a different level. For example, Jon never emphasized his fascination with migrant workers. Yet he talked about how he finds them easy to work with and natural to photograph. Migrant workers are all he photographed during the trips he took to the suburb of Shanghai. When I asked him what he wanted to photograph. He told me, anything that caught his eyes. He would not say what draws his attention. It was like putting together a puzzle to figure out what interests him as a photographer. All that became very clear when I transcribed the interview. It was also fun to get a sense of how my subjects speak and what their pet words are.

After transcribing the interviews and talking to journalists, I got the idea that there are several types of China-based journalists. I can’t group them all into three or four categories. But I’m happy to say that my three subjects represent different types of journalists at different stages of their careers.

**Weekly Report Ten: August 27**

The Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu said the most unsettling and worrisome period of making a film is the time when the shooting is about to come to an end. I think
what he meant is by that time you know what you have and what your film will be like. You know it if it is good; and you know it if it is far from good. And the most disheartening thing is you know there’s not much more you can do at that point. There’s only so much editing you can do.

I have less than two weeks left to shoot. At this time, I know what I have and what I don’t. What I have is not nearly what I planned to get. The project is not nearly as good as what I had expected. Is this surprising? Not really. Instead of thinking how awful a video journalist I am, I think a more accurate description would be that I was not ready for this project. I’m not sure if you can be fully ready for any project. But I was definitely not ready to produce the work I had imagined.

Yasujiro Ozu also said he didn’t want to make a war movie right after he went back to Japan after being a soldier in the war. He would make a war movie eventually, but he wanted his memory and reflection to brew first. I was eager to do this project mainly because of my own curiosity and confusion. After living in the U.S. for almost three years, I wasn’t sure how to make sense of what I had felt and learned from living abroad. So this project is less about journalism, but more about my confusion on how living abroad shapes one person. Three months is way too short a period for a topic this complicated.

I worked hard on this project. But I didn’t work hard enough to produce the work that I will be proud of. I researched a lot for this project. But my research wasn’t nearly enough, and that’s the main reason why my stories are superficial.

I’ve heard the saying that writers/film directors create one story in their entire career. He or she might have many works, but essentially they are the same story. I’m not
done with this project yet. I might be done with it now, for my degree. But this project is more like my research for something else I will work on later in my career.

I used to hate the idea to think of my project as student work. Calling it student work, in my earlier opinion, makes it easier for the producer to say it’s okay to lower the standards and it’s okay to make mistakes that professionals don’t make. But what I produced is student work. Of course some student works are professional and extraordinarily good. I’m referring more to the average level of student work. I made a lot of mistakes. I wasn’t professionally enough in techniques and reporting skills. I’m still learning and I wasn’t confident enough to give myself time and patience to do that.

Do I regret proposing to do this project now? No, absolutely no. I’ve learned so many things so far. I only wish I could learn faster and faster and faster. I remember David said something like how graduate students expect their master’s project to be this wonderful piece of work and how they end up feeling disappointed. There’s a learning process, and maybe this is the biggest take-away after all.

Thanks for reading.

Weekly Report Eleven: September 16

I wrote I wish to get a better idea of what type of journalist I want to be after finishing this project in the proposal. Although I haven’t talked to as many journalists as I would like to, I did get a chance to see journalists’ lives at different stages. I started this project, hoping to get to some kind of conclusion. Now I’m in the final stage of the project, feeling that I have reached no conclusion whatsoever. Journalists’ experiences can vary depending on when they came to China, how old they were when they came to China, what type of people they are exposed to during their time in China, their attitudes,
their financial situations, and how they make sense of what they went through. I wished I could reach a conclusion that indicates the reportage of China has gotten better. There are more journalists around, the technology has gotten more convenient, and Chinese are more willing to talk. Why shouldn’t it? But as a photographer who has been in China since 1989 said, he has seen ups and downs in China. He also has seen news cycles repeating itself. One group of journalists came, and they wrote stories that have been written by the previous group of journalists who might just have left. The topics are similar. Some of them approach the topic a bit differently and give readers a fresh perspective. Some others don’t.

I also have a different idea of how to see journalism. I’ve talked journalists who still believe in journalism and ex-journalists who have given up on journalism. After all, it’s a job, a profession, not a dreamy ideal as it is for me now. It is not a fancy job; it’s like any other job that has its limitations and daily frustrations. There are all kinds of forces out there that try to stop you from doing the work you want to pursue. And it will be your decision to make whether to continue or to leave for something else. There’s a mentality in the journalism school bubble that makes leaving journalism an unfathomable, scary, even a bit despicable idea. There was a discussion among Chinese media industry as why veteran journalists are leaving. Journalism seems to be a profession of people under age 35. After you reach 35, you possibly have seen it all. With high stress, low pay, little respect from the public and a career seems to go nowhere, the journalism dream now seems like a joke. What should you continue? Maybe this is not true in the U.S., but this is the real problem in China. The foreign journalists I talk to also have their concerns: they might be tired with the types of journalism they have been doing; the coverage they
do possibly have taken a toll on their mentality and drained their emotion; they don’t have enough support to pursue the journalism they want to do; they are completely burned out because they are working on too many projects to make a living. At the end of the day, you got to ask yourself: what keeps you going? What type of work you are dedicated into producing? If you don’t ask yourself questions like this, you might be just taken away by the flood of the trivial and cruel reality.

Another theme that’s constantly being brought up is the notion of “making a difference.” This idea is not strange to any journalism student. In fact, this is what draws young people into the profession. Who doesn’t want to be the Don Quixote in real life — to fight for social justice and to give the powerless a voice? It’s funny how multiple journalists recommend Jonathan Spencer’s book *To Change China: Western Advisers in China* to me. If you intend to come to China to make a difference, as one journalist put it, read this book and think again. When I talked to David Barboza, the bureau chief of *the New York Times* in Shanghai, he said he’s not concerned if his work made a difference or not because he doesn’t want to think of himself as that important. The goal of making a difference sometimes interrelates with ego and personal satisfaction. At times it is hard to distinguish if the journalist is dedicated in fighting for social justice or merely taking advantage of it for vanity.

One last thing that struck me is how journalists’ attitudes affect their experiences in China to such a large extent. To use the adjectives such as optimistic and pessimistic would be nothing but a gross over-simplification of the complex love-hate relationships journalists have with China. I used to hate a Chinese saying: “personality determines fate.” It now struck me to bear some truth after all.
Weekly Report Twelve: September 26

Two weeks have passed since I met you on campus. I’ve spent most of my time on trivial things such as registering my car in Maryland and arranging furniture in my place. It’s amazing how errands eat up your time without you knowing it. Also, I have spent a large chunk of time applying to internships/jobs, an exhaustingly long and at times frustrating process.

So the point is I didn’t get much done. I interviewed two journalists and transcribed one interview this week. The problem is all seven journalists I talked to are men. I didn’t intentionally approach male journalists only. Now looking back, I could say that no less than 70 percent of the journalists I talked to while in China are men. Although without any statistics to support it, my guess is that this could be a reflection of the gender ratio among foreign journalists in China. When I asked journalists who they consider to be the best journalists in China, most of the time they gave me names that are obviously men. Regardless, I cannot and will not finish my project without female voices. I’ve contacted four female journalists so far, but I haven’t heard any response yet. I will contact more in the following week and follow up with the journalists that have not responded yet. This has reminded me of my early weeks when working on this project. Sometimes it takes journalists weeks to reply. Getting access is the most difficult thing. It takes time, patience and persistence.

I’m well aware that I’m way behind my video-editing schedule. In fact, I had a dream the other day that I made a mistake recording the audio (ha, I think I know where this dream originates from) and thought to myself how could I fix this in post-production.
I think this is a reminder from my sub-consciousness that I need to start editing right away!

My plan for next week is to get at least Stuart’s piece done. For the interview, my goal is to interview at least two female journalists, and I hope to get that done by next week.

One last note, for my research, I’m reading Louisa Lim’s book *The People’s Republic of Amnesia Tiananmen Revisited*, an amazing recount of what happened on June 4, 1989. Tiananmen Square is my favorite place in Beijing. My eyes welled up when I first stood in front of it. It bears so many beautiful and at the same time painful memories of the nation. I was born in 1989, two months after the terrible event. And I didn’t know about it until I left the country when I was 21. I couldn’t even start to describe what it feels like to know how you’ve been wrapped in lies and propagandas for a good 21 years. Reading this book is not a pleasant experience. But I do enjoy the freedom of knowing the truth. It reminds me of one of my favorite lines in the movie *Thelma & Louise*: “I feel awake. Wide awake. I don’t remember ever feeling this way… You feel like that, too. Like you got something to look forward to.”

**Weekly Report Thirteen: Oct. 7**

The Japanese screenwriter Shinobu Hashimoto recalled the creation of the screenplay *Seven Samurai*, Akira Kurosawa’s most celebrated work. Kurosawa had Hashimoto and another screenwriter stay at a teahouse and write for eight hours everyday for about three months. (I can’t remember some of the details since I don’t have the book with me right now.) After eight hours of intense writing and rewriting for weeks, Kurosawa got so tired that he got sick for a few days. When they finally finished the
screenplay, Hashimoto was exhausted physically and mentally. More importantly, he felt tremendously sad because he sensed that was the best work he has ever wrote and will be the best he will ever write. And from now on, everything is only going to go down.

My own editing process reminded me of this anecdote. It is not because I believe I have created my best work. I thought of this because I experienced the same excitement, joy, confusion, anger and exhaustion Hashimoto had described. Creation something original takes so much energy and effort. It is not easy. Unlike Kurosawa or Hashimoto, I don’t always end up with a work that I am particularly fond of. Just like how Jon sees his photos: when you first took it, you were so happy that you got that moment and you think the photo is great. However, after a few days, you took another look at it, you started to feel it is just as boring as many others you have taken.

All that said, I’m proud of this short piece I have put together. Sure there’s a lot more to fix and I’m excited to hear your feedback. I have worked very hard along the way and it is the best I could do now.

Here are some issues I encountered during the editing:

First, the audio accounts probably 50 percent of the workload. I stopped using BeachTek after it went wrong a couple times. I tried it a few times. It was just very difficult to monitor the volume through the meters on BeachTek (because it doesn’t give me the accurate information). Even if I had a brand new BeachTek, it adds more weight to my gears when I’m out in the field. And I try to bring as less as possible in an environment where I have no control of. So I just hooked the mic up with my recorder and recorded all the way when I was out with Jon. The result is I have three one-hour-long audio clips and I need to match them up with the video pieces I shot. I used
PluralEyes to sync. For reasons I don’t know, PluralEyes could sync certain videos, but not others. So I was left to sync the rest manually. That was not fun at all. It was the most tedious work that makes me want to bang my head against the wall! I wonder how you all handled this and if you could give me some advice.

The second issue is the subtitles. In Final Cut Pro, I can add lower-third credit text as subtitles. But I need to do that with each sentence and again match them manually. I also have to move them around each time to make sure they appear on the roughly same place on the screen. That is painstakingly slow. There has to be a better way to do this right? How do people do that in a film? Is there a system that you can import the content, and the system will automatically export the subtitles when you play the video?

The last issue I have is how to tell the story visually. I edited the story chronically. Does this work? Does this make sense to you? I have listened to all the materials for so long. Please let me know if there’s anything you find confusing. Also, does the length sound right to you? I’m sure I can cut maybe one minute or two out, if necessary. Also, I know some of the shots are awfully shaky. I wish I could’ve done a better job handholding. That’s also something I hope to improve in the future.

**Weekly Report Fourteen: Oct. 24**

A fellow graduate of my alma mater Sichuan University made a documentary One Child about the families who lost their only child in the devastating 8.0 earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, and it is nominated for an Oscar! Only 50 miles away from the epicenter, we watched the buildings shaking like in the fantasy movies and for a moment, some of us thought we were going to die. Back then, we were both freshman in college. I have never met the film director Mu Zijian, but I’ve heard about him going off to New
York University to study News and Documentary. As someone who comes from Beichuan, an area that was hit the most badly, Mu has family members who passed away in this earthquake, and he has made his mind that he’s going to make a documentary about his. And now he presents all of us this wonderful documentary about the families whose suffering continues.

This news is quite encouraging for many reasons. As a Sichuanness, I’m proud of him for making this documentary to give the families a voice that they don’t have in Chinese media and draw our attention to their struggling after the traumatic event. Second of all, this documentary has again consolidates my belief in the power of storytelling. Mr. Mu has told the story that matters to him (and all of us who went through that earthquake together). What is the story I want to tell? In the end, I want to tell stories that are personal to me. I know I want to tell stories about my parents who are migrants from the countryside to make a living in a city where they had no place to stay. They had to leave their newborn daughter to her grandparents for three years and feel heartbroken when she called them uncle and aunt. I want to tell stories of my aunt and countless women her age in China who suffer severe depression. My aunt fought her way to become a millionaire, yet her wealth didn’t grant her happiness but only sabotaged her marriage, her relationship with the family and eventually her health. I want to tell stories of women my age who were told we were unwanted and lesser than because we are girls. I want to tell stories of how sexism poisoned the entire society and the heart of many young women and men.

Right after graduation, it’s easy to forget your purpose when you are flooded with urgent things like hunting for jobs and finding ways to become economically independent.
It’s easy to get frustrated, confused and lost. I hope at those moments, I will come back to think about my master’s project and what I learned here.

Stories matter.

I’m now finishing up transcribing interviews and will start writing the professional analysis next week. I will get the first draft of the final report done by early November. I’m also working on the last piece of the micro-doc, which is going pretty well.
Chapter Three: Evaluation

It has never been clearer what my purpose is. After I continue to hone my skills and techniques in the U.S. for a few years, I know I will go back to China to be a visual storyteller.

Before I finished my project, I doubted my ability to produce decent work. I remember my anxiety each time before shooting, my mental practice of remembering the composition techniques I had just learned from Lynda.com the night before on the subway, and my frustration shooting footage with blurry focus and unusable audio in the beginning of the project. By the end of the shooting, I feel much more comfortable when I am shooting. I have gotten the muscle memory to keep everything in focus and white balance correct. Knocking basic techniques out of my process freed my time and energy to focus on storytelling.

Before this project, it was difficult for me to go without using every frame of the footage I shot. To kill my darlings would be like killing me. This experience reminds me of my time when I first learned to report and write at Missourian. It was a struggle every time during editing. Later when I was working on longer stories for Vox, I was much better at deleting irrelevant paragraphs. That was a big improvement because new writers cannot bear the idea of not using a great quote, regardless of its relevance. I see the same pattern happening during my learning process with video. If the story does not need the particular shot I personally liked, I do not hesitate to delete it.

Editing has become easier as I have developed my own process.

- Back-up everything
- Evaluate and categorize all my footage for later use
Listen to the interviews and audio and sync those I will use with video. I do not always edit audio first. With interview-heavy segments, I edit the audio first because the subject’s narration carries the story forward. With stories that move forward through videos, I throw in sound bites like I add quotes in a story last.

- Edit the piece with both audio and video
- Color grade it
- Pick music
- Smooth everything out and pace the story

In shooting, I am more proficient at identifying lighting and sound sources and the color of lighting. I am conscious of focus and composition. I am quicker at setting up my gears and adjusting my positions to stay out of the way. I am also much comfortable with myself holding a camera in public. Holding a camera is like yelling for everybody to look at me. That used to make me uncomfortable. After filming my subject Stuart in the crowded subway, I feel I have moved past that. I am comfortable holding a camera and waving it in front of peoples’ faces because that is my job, and people respect it.

During post-production, my laptop crashed twice and made me want to bang my head against the wall. Understandably my laptop simply cannot handle the large video files I have running simultaneously with Adobe Audition and PluraEyes. So learning to organize files properly and import only necessary files into Final Cut Pro can save lots of headaches. It is also important to watch the storage room my laptop has so that I can clean in time. I also ran into lots of issues with the limited functions Final Cut Pro provides. Final Cut Pro is good for short videos. When editing longer pieces, Final Cut’s
one-and-only timeline makes it difficult to move around b-rolls. In comparison, Adobe Premiere has multiple timelines that makes it easier to edit different camera angles and b-roll footage. I have not become proficient in Premiere, so I cannot compare yet. But whenever I move my files or change the file names even in the same folder imported in Final Cut, Final Cut would not be able to locate the files anymore. It only gives me the scary-looking, red “MISSING” sign on my timeline, which gives me a minor heart attack every time!

I have learned how to use Adobe Audition to reduce noise in audio. Needless to say, this project has taught me the tremendous importance of audio. Learning to use Audition helped me to recognize sounds and clean the audio after understanding how audio frequencies work. Beyond getting more proficient with Final Cut Pro, I also learned video-editing tools such as PluralEyes.

Besides the technique improvement, I am getting better at working with my subjects. It is a pity that I did not have more time to hang out with my subjects and film more. It is usually the time when the shooting was about to end when I feel my subjects are most relaxed with me being there. I believe if I had longer time to work on this project, my docs would be much more intimate than the way they are now. This is probably a balance every filmmaker has to consider between quality and budget/deadline.

When I was in J-school’s ethics class, we debated whether a journalist should interfere with what
is happening and I was all for complete non-interference. But then, once shooting, I rushed to help when someone was on the spot. While out with my subject Jon on a trip to the Huangpu River, when he finished shooting, he casually put one of his lenses on his car trunk and forgot about it. When he opened the trunk, the lens fell of the car and bounced on the ground. I should have continued filming. It would have captured his frustration for possibly breaking his expensive lens, and it is important to capture it because that is the price you pay for freelance work. But in reality, I rushed to pick up the lens for him and missed the opportunity. Another time, my subject Stuart got stuck with his bike when the elevator door shut to close. Again I rushed to push the button so he could come in easily. I should have continued filming. At those moments, I did not think. I simply reacted then and regretted it later. To be the fly on the wall is not easy. When it comes to human courtesy to help others, it makes the videographer look like cold-blooded machine who does not care about anything other than her footage. But this is why not every videographer is a professional. It takes time for reflection and training.

The difficulty to translate accurately was also something I did not anticipate. From the feedback I got from my chair, he got the message that Jon’s Mandarin is outstanding, which is what I wished to deliver visually. Jon’s language skill is what gets his subjects to agree to be photographed. The ability to speak the language is a skill essential to produce quality work in China. I specifically asked Jon how he picked up slang and phrases popular in the rural areas. The fact that he lived in rural areas and spent nights with migrant workers speaks to what type of journalist he is. I did not realize that the word “peasants” stand out in the subtitle until my chair mentioned it. My English teacher used to emphasize the difference between farmers and peasants in my high school
classroom. “Farmers are rich landowners who employee people and machines to do the work,” she said. “The kinds of farmers that exist in our country that are poor are called peasants. Remember, big difference.”

The middle-aged woman at the riverbank was a bit reluctant to give Jon her name and profession. In the Chinese society, profession is linked to class and social status. Peasants do not even belong to the working class. (I was told that there is no equivalent class in America.) I hope viewers get the idea that Jon is obsessed with migrant workers, a class ranked higher only than criminals. In journalism school, we were taught journalism is to give the voiceless a voice and speak for the less privileged. Jon’s work puts a human face on the invisible migrant workers, and I find that truly inspiring.

Since the first day I picked up a camera, I felt its impact. It was empowering. However, on the receiving end, it is a different story. The presence of a camera can change peoples’ behavior and speech. I learned that when I was filmed myself. But my uneasiness quickly went away after my first on-camera interview. People deal with cameras differently. The two shirtless men standing on a truck did not like the presence of my camera. They were fine when Jon tried to persuade them to be photographed. But they squatted down in the truck to hide
themselves immediately after I pointed my camera at them. I moved my camera away to Jon’s direction. They got up, started to put on their shirts and refused Jon’s request for a photo. Their response made me incredibly uncomfortable. I felt guilty for ruining Jon’s chance to get a photo with these men. I also started to worry if Jon would want to take me along with him again. But as we went along, other people he photographed seemed to be fine with my presence. I do not know why exactly. Maybe it is because I am Chinese and a woman, so they do not feel intimidated?

I have complained about the physical disadvantages of female videographers quite a few times. Pro. Steve Rice always told me that the best videographer he knows is a female journalist the same height as me. But when trying to nudge your way through tall, strongly built male journalists to get the shots, it is hard to hold back inner anxiety and insecurity. But I do feel that being a young petite Chinese woman makes it easier for me to negotiate access with Chinese sometimes. When I went to film Jon swimming, I knew that the lifeguard is instructed to forbid anyone from taking photos without permission. I expected that I would need to explain myself. When he approached me, I told him that I was taking photos of a foreigner. And I mentioned I was a student working for my master’s project. I guess he assumed it was normal for students to photograph foreigners. He looked at me as I explained, nodded and walked away. He could have asked me to leave.
The ethics of gaining access can be tricky. It depends on the journalist as how much information he or she gives away to the subjects. I did not lie to the lifeguard. Neither did I tell him that I was also taking videos and they could be published. But under that context, I did not feel ethically wrong to have withheld that information because I did not think he could get in trouble because of my footage. Even if I had included the footage, which I did not, viewers would not see the name of the facility. Even if the owner figured it out and was unhappy about it, he or she could never find out who was responsible of letting me in because no date is shown. So the lifeguard would not be punished because he let me film inside the facility. Sometimes explaining too much makes Chinese people suspicious. So I did not bother to spend fives minutes explaining myself to get some harmless footage.

To get the job done fast requires a journalist to work with the situation. But certain journalistic principles should never be violated. What I learned from this project is that ethics means different things to different journalists. It is up to the journalist to uphold the standard he or she sets.

The identity of students is another way to guarantee access. It worked with Chinese people and also my subjects, the foreign journalists. Foreign journalists are just happy to help a journalist student in general.

Access, essentially, is trust. It could take up to years to build that trust for desired intimacy. Over the past summer, I stayed at my best friend Junya’s place in Shanghai to save cost. She has been my best friend since college, yet I continue to learn new things about her. And I would not have known any of it if I had not shared the same room and bed with her for three months. If it takes such a long time to know my friend, how can I
expect my subjects to open up the second time I meet him or her? I think this project really taught me to respect my subjects and be patient.

My final discovery from this project is the value of transcription. I hate transcribing. But transcribing interviews have largely helped me understand my subjects and their perspectives. Each time I read the transcript, I learn something new or understand the same point at a different level. After finishing the transcripts, trends and variations appear and everything seems to come together. The tediousness of transcribing made me underrate the value of it. Now I understand why some magazines require their reporters to transcribe interviews.

This project has solidly prepared my skills in video shooting and editing. Instead of worrying about basic shooting techniques, now I have the freedom to consider how to tell the story and apply the skills I learned from writing to visual storytelling. I have a lot to learn about visual storytelling and improving the aesthetics of my film. In the future, I want to explore different styles of cinematography and creative visual editing.
Chapter Four: Description of Micro-documentaries

The Trail Of A Documentary Photographer (Jonathan Browning)

Before I worked on this project, I had imagined China-based foreign journalists to share traits such as expressiveness, ambition and aggressiveness. Jon does not have any of that. He’s quiet, and he is minding his own business as he works. He came to China because he did not know what to do with his life after graduation. He grew up in what he calls a boring small town south of London, and that’s part of the reason why he has enjoyed Shanghai’s international feel.

Jon never talks about what he thinks of journalism or photography; he just does it. Certainly there are journalists who come to China because they are curious about the country or they want to tell stories, but the majority of journalists come to China because of opportunities. It is that simple. I get the impression that Jon is not so concerned about making a difference with his photos, as most photographers inspire to; he is more interested in doing the job he enjoys quietly.
And what sets Jon’s style is how he approaches photography. He brings little of himself in his work. He does not carry an ego with him when he photographs. I went with him on two trips. Following him photographing was the most exciting thing I did over the summer. It would take him all afternoon in the sun or in the rain to produce three or four photos. And then he might not select any of them in the final edit. What amazed me is how he could objectively say what photos did not work and just let go of it. He was pretty good at murdering his darlings each time (a wonderful skill for any journalist to have).

The story is about how he photographs migrant workers living by the Huangpu River. I wanted to show the viewers how difficult it is to produce a photo, and I wanted to take them along with me to those trips of walking around in the rain/sun without knowing what would turn up.

**China PTSD (Lara Farrar)**
Lara has a wonderful story, and she is great on camera. She has been in China since 2008. She’s honest about her love and hate relationship with China. Frustration is probably the most frequently used word in the interview. Her story is about leaving.

There are many reasons for that. First, being in China made her appreciative of home. She wants to go back to her hometown in Arkansas and write about the American south. Second, she is frustrated by being the perpetual outsider. The Chinese people always see her as a foreigner, not as a fellow human being, she said. And she is certainly not alone in feeling this way. Third, she sees a repeating news cycle. She has seen lots of foreign journalists fall into the habit of sitting at the desk, calling people and writing stories based on Xinhua reports. She believes that reporters lose their skills when they stay in China for too long. They forget how to file a FOI request, they forget what they can do and cannot do, and they do not keep up with the latest technology to improve their reporting. Finally, she is very critical of the western coverage, and she does not want to write any superficial, simplified stories anymore. She seemed bitter, cynical and even pessimistic about life and journalism in China. She said she is not sure if all that comes from the fact that she is totally burned out.

Her story represents a large group of journalists who are frustrated with China and plan to leave.

**Veteran Journalist New In Beijing (Stuart Leavenworth)**

When Stuart told me learning Mandarin at age 54 is the most difficult thing he has ever trying to do in the interview, I felt my eyes welled up. I remember thinking I did not know if I would have the courage to move to a new country and start learning one of the
most difficult languages in the world when I was 54.

Stuart is a true believer in journalism. He feels the responsibility to inform his readers back in the States. And his biggest fear is getting things wrong and misleading his readers. This is a common concern I heard from journalists. Foreign journalists are well aware of the criticism Western coverage gets, and they try hard not to make that mistake.

Stuart is active in getting around to learn about the city and the Chinese culture. He is fascinated with the things and people he sees on the street. This story is to show how an experienced journalist tries to start a new chapter in his life after relocating to a foreign country.
Chapter Five: Professional Analysis

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 Jianluomenwai 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 looks 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.
Appendix A: Original Project Proposal

Introduction

I grew up in Chengdu, a middle-sized city located in Southwest China. When I was in elementary school, I spent every Sunday afternoon sitting in the dark living room and watching my favorite show Zhengdazongyi. It is an infotainment show that invites a group from the audience to compete in answering several rounds of questions. The show usually chose a foreign country as the theme topic, and that’s where I learned all my geography lessons. Most people wanted to be the one who got all the questions right and won big prizes; I wanted to be the on-camera reporter who travelled to other countries and explained to her audience the history of the red-brick building she stood in front of or the people who invited her to dinner. As cliché as it is, that was my dream: I wanted to see the world.

My dream took me to the Missouri School of Journalism. Before coming to journalism school, I believed the great works I read in books and watched in movies are products of magic mixed of creativity and talent. My writing classes changed how I view art and creativity. I learned any piece of work with significance is built up upon years of practice on craft. My professor Jacqui Banaszynski introduced me to narrative journalism and taught me the techniques to best tell a story: building characters, reorganizing structures, describing scenes and pacing the story, all united under one theme as the spine of the story.

David Rees, my “Fundamentals of Photojournalism” class professor, opened a door for me to explore ways of telling a story through photography. In my “Micro-Documentary Photojournalism and Videography” class with Professor Steve Rice, I
learned visual languages and practiced video shooting and editing techniques. At the same time, I realized that story telling techniques (such as structure, transition, detail, scene, style, character and pacing) I picked up from writing classes still apply to visual storytelling.

It is my goal to become a documentary filmmaker in 10 years. I’ve always loved movies and documentaries, and I’m fascinated with visual storytelling. However, I do understand the difference between loving watching a documentary and enjoying producing one. During the production of the two micro-documentaries for my class this semester, I enjoyed the process so much that I could spend six hours working on editing a three-minute video piece with only bathroom breaks. The pleasure of creating something and the thought process that goes into better telling a story visually is what keeps me motivated. I know I want to continue producing micro-documentaries, and my master’s project is a great opportunity to challenge myself and improve my skills.

As someone who spent two years living abroad and having core values being constantly challenged, I’m always interested in how individuals respond to the changing environments. When I interned at the New York Times in Shanghai, I worked with Bureau Chief David Barboza. Once he thought the pictures his Chinese wife showed him on a news website was potentially a story about tomb raiding and asked me to confirm it. It turned out to be villagers stealing relics from the riverbank. He was disappointed when he knew it was not the story he had thought. To me, that seems a frustration foreign journalists go through constantly. And the frustration goes beyond unable to read local newspapers. U.S. journalists based in China have to conquer not only the language barrier but also the cultural barriers in society and the journalism industry.
Personally I could relate to their experience. From the very first day I arrived in the U.S., I didn’t understand common sense terms such as Democrats and Republicans, let alone their differences. I once called the University of Michigan and asked for Professor Ann Arbor until the receptionist kindly reminded me that’s the name of the city. Whenever I traveled to New York or California, a few Americans asked me where Missouri is and warned me that I could be the target of racism.

The reality is, in less than two years, I grew attached to Missouri, and I am grateful I lived here and met people who have taught me so many things about life and myself. When I was little, I thought seeing the world would show me the differences. But what I discovered is the commonality that all humans share. Living abroad has fundamentally changed how I think about my hometown, the world and myself.

I wonder what motivated the journalists to go to China and what kept them there for years. After two years of studying in journalism school and understanding the two different press systems, I constantly think about how I would adjust myself to report in China. What are U.S. journalists’ experiences? Do they change how they practice journalism when reporting in a country like China, a place where the mainstream culture is less expressive in national personality and more suspicious to the press in general? How do they negotiate with sources when they have a different understanding of how the media functions? When reporting in a foreign country, what’s the primary responsibility of a journalist? Who are they serving? Their audience in the U.S.? How can they be truthful and fair to their audience in both countries? Have they had their core beliefs challenged?
I’m curious about the questions I raised above not only because they are fascinating research questions, but also because they are personal questions I will encounter at some point in my career as a journalist. I think my personal experience as a Chinese who learned all professional norms from a U.S. journalism school makes me a good fit for this project. My training in micro-documentary production, photography and writing classes prepared me for this project.

This is the most challenging and ambitious project I’ve ever worked on, and I believe the process of making the micro-documentaries will help me learn more about myself: what type of journalist I want to become; what are the core values I hold dear; what are my strengths and weaknesses? Also, documentary filmmaking takes practice and exposure to failure. This project will be a chance for me to practice shooting techniques and form a post-production workflow that will serve my future career.

The Professional Skills Component

For my professional project, I will produce three micro-documentaries about U.S. journalists’ experience reporting in China by following three journalists working for different mediums and publications at Shanghai.

Who my subjects are has a direct impact on the success of the project. Thorough research will be done before I make any initial contact. I will build a list of potential sources that could be a good fit for either my micro-documentary or research subjects. Since my project lasts more than two months, it gives me time to look for other potential subjects as I film the first one or two. I am also open to meeting potential journalists along my filming process.
Specific profession: Ideally, the three journalists will be one writer, one photographer/videographer/documentary filmmaker and one radio/broadcast journalist.

Location: Depending on my subjects’ schedule, I would love to include footage of rural areas in China such as small towns in Sichuan, the province where I come from. But mostly I would base in Shanghai and follow journalists working in Shanghai. The reason I choose Shanghai over Beijing is due to my tight budget. I can stay at a friend’s place in Shanghai to cut cost. Also, I lived in Shanghai before, so I am familiar with the city. I might follow one journalist working in Chengdu since it is my hometown.

Gender, age, race and experience: I intend to follow one female and two male journalists. I prefer a variety in terms of my sources’ age, race and years of work experience. Although the majority of journalists reporting in China are white (Wu & Hamilton, 2004), I want to find someone with Asian (preferably Chinese) descent, someone like the author of Factory Girls Leslie Chang. However, all these are subject to change, depending on my subjects’ availability and my schedule.

Company: In terms of publications, I plan to find one freelancer; one working for a prestigious media company and the last one can either be a staff member of a media organization or a freelancer.

Each micro-documentary will be four-to-five minutes long. The three documentaries could be put together into one 15-minute piece. But my goal is to explore different ways of telling a story and to give each micro-documentary its own style and pacing. So I will start by producing three separate pieces that share consistency and unity, but also variety and difference.
The time frame for me to work in China starts from mid-June to early September. For each piece, I plan to spend two to three weeks with my subject. Since I’m following journalists who have rather flexible schedules, I might film one journalist one day and film another in the following day, depending on my subject’s schedule and my budget (whether I could fly with them to another location to film). So it won’t be 14 consecutive days to film one person. It could be two days in June and four days in July at different locations.

Access will be discussed depending on each subject’s need and the story before filming. From my perspective, I want to film EVERYTHING. If possible, I would like to sleep on the floor in my subject’s apartment. However, I won’t know the details until I meet my subjects and talk to them in person. It is important to keep in mind that this project takes a lot of time investment from my sources. Therefore, to make that clear could help the following process.

In the three weeks of following him or her around, I hope my micro-documentary will give viewers a sense of how they do their job, the challenges they face and their reflections. Also, I want my viewers to feel like they know the subject, and they could relate to him or her. It would not just be a story about a journalist. It’s about a person’s transformation and growth. In the end, I wish I could extract one word to describe each micro-documentary. That word would be the theme of the story. And the three micro-documentaries are interconnected and complementary to each other.

One question that lingers on the back of my mind is how can I film someone’s transformation in three weeks? I probably can’t. But I will use interviews to add depth to each piece. My general experience with journalists is that they are very reflective and
expressive. I’m not concerned that I would have difficulty getting good sound bites. The challenge is to get good b-rolls and to tell the story effectively. More importantly, as much as I emphasize the “story” nature of each piece, this project is documentaries with a clear purpose: to document. It shocked me to find out how little visual material there is about foreign journalists based in China. So if this project could deliver a sense of understanding toward a life we know little about, it will be a success to me.

I will arrive in China on June 9 and start filming on June 15. (The exact date could change depending on my sources’ schedule, but I will start on June 20 at the latest.) I will film for eight weeks (each week at least 20 hours) and conduct interviews with journalists for the research component (two hours with each journalist, a total of 40 hours, including setting up the equipment and preparing questions). Each week, I will spend at least 15 hours to transcribe and edit. Since I have a rather flexible filming schedule, I will work on editing and researching on days when I am not filming.

Since this is an independent project in China, I will keep my committee members updated on my work process and file weekly reports. I will create a private blog for the weekly reports and email the link to my committee whenever I update my blog. Also, it is way too costly for me to go back to China to film more if I miss any shots. I will update rough cuts on Vimeo during the course of my project, so that I can get feedbacks from my committee members to ensure I have enough shots for each documentary.

I will come back to the U.S. on Sept. 12 and meet with my committee members. Then I will spend another four weeks to refine the three pieces and finish my research paper. I plan to finish the final project by Oct. 15 and present my project in late October or early November.
All three micro-documentaries will be self-published on Vimeo. I would also pitch the micro-documentary project to Slate, MediaStorm and Global Journalist. I will pitch the professional analysis (the magazine style article) to Columbia Journalism Review, American Journalism Review and Global Journalist.

Here is my list the gears:

- Canon 5D Mark II
- Nikon D7000
- Canon 24-105 mm lens
- Canon 50 mm lens
- Nikon 18-105 mm lens
- Zoom H4N Digital Voice Recorder 1.9" LCD - Portable
- A pair of Sony wireless microphones
- DXA-SLR PRO - DSLR Audio Adapter (BeachTek)
- One tripod
- One shoulder gig
- MacBook pro 13-inch
- Two hard drives (each one TB)
- Three CF cards (16 GB, 48 GB and 4 GB)
- Four SD cards (Two 32 GB and two 8 GB)
- Sony MDR7506 Professional Large Diaphragm Headphone

In the final project report, correspondence with journalists participating in the project, interview transcriptions and weekly field reports will be included.
For my research component, I will have in-depth interviews with eight U.S. journalists working in China or who worked in China for an extensive period of time. The length of the interview will last from one hour to two hours in total with each journalist. The interview could be conducted in person, over the phone, through Skype or any other chatting tools as the subjects please. If the interview is conducted in person, it will be recorded on camera. Similar to my intention to find a variety of sources for my professional project, I will try to get sources from different backgrounds to better represent the larger demographic, resulting in a professional analysis (magazine article).

RQ: How do China-based U.S. Journalists Adjust Their Professional Norm and Practice?

1. What is the foreign journalists’ background (race, gender, age, education, years of experience, family background, company, beat, etc.)?

2. How do they define their professional role?

3. How have their professional norms or journalistic practice changed after working in China?

4. How have they changed personally?

5. Their reflections on their coverage of China?

Theory

With the downsizing of media organizations and closing of foreign bureaus, the roles of journalists who remain overseas become even more important. More so, how international correspondents see their role as professionals could have significant impacts on what we watch on TV and read in the newspaper everyday.
Role conception first appeared in Cohen’s (1963) study of foreign correspondents and their understanding of professional norms. Cohen defined two roles conceptions in journalism: the neutral reporter and the participant.

Journalism doesn’t come from a vacuum. The experiment conducted by Starck and Soloski (1977) showed journalism students who saw their roles as participants included more analyses and interpretation in articles than those who saw themselves as neutral reporters. Kocher (1986) suggested that neutral and participant journalism are theoretical concepts, and in reality the two roles are largely mixed.

After a comparative study among five countries (the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Sweden), Patterson and Donsbach (1996) suggested a significant correlation between journalists’ personal beliefs and their news decisions. Cross-culture and cross-country comparative studies showed that role conception could have a strong influence on journalists’ professional conduct (Donsbach, 2008) and the way they practice the objectivity norm (Skovsgaard et al., 2011).

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) contended that role conceptions have a direct influence on news content because the understanding of their professional roles determine what they think is worth communicating to their audience, and how the story should be developed.

Journalists learned their professional role through education, training and work experience (Breed, 1955). Breed suggested reporters internalize professional norms through company policy education and socialization within the newsroom.

There’s disagreement in the academy about whether an individual journalist’s role conception is shaped by the industry’s majority culture of the country they work in
(Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996) or if it is a characteristic journalists share as a professional group (Donsbach, 2010).

When role conceptions are compared across countries, even in countries with freedom of press, journalistic practices can vary, depending on the political, legal and historical settings and demographic structures (Kocher, 1986). After comparing British and German journalists, Kocher described German reporters as missionaries and their British counterparts as bloodhounds: hunters of news. German journalists are more comfortable taking up the active role of advocacy to speak for the underdog and be the proponent of new ideas and value judgments, whereas their British colleagues identify more with the mirror function in journalism. Donsbach (2005) suggested that German journalists’ stronger advocative understanding of the profession and less editorial control could allow more subjectivity. A study of foreign correspondents working in the U.S. concluded this group of journalists see themselves as interpreters of foreign activities and cultural ambassador rather than objective messengers (Willnat & Weaver, 2003).

Zhu et al. (1997) conclude that journalists in mainland China are more comfortable and willing to assume the interpretative role compared to their counterparts in the U.S. and Taiwan. Donsbach (2005) argues that, as a factor, we could assume the role conception will lead to homogeneity within and heterogeneity between media systems, meaning “the role perception within a profession of a country is similar, but that it can diverge strongly between countries” (p. 167).

After comparing journalists’ role conception in China, Taiwan and the U.S., Zhu et al. (1997) found societal factors had the strongest impact on role conceptions among
journalists. The organization had a significant, but weak impact. The individual factor has virtually no impact. Does this still hold true for journalists reporting oversea?

In summary, studies suggest the correlation between role conception and news content. There exists an extensive body of research in comparing role conceptions across countries and cultures. However, few researchers look into foreign journalists’ role conception and how the two professional norms they experience clash and merge.

This project could be helpful for fellow journalists who currently work abroad or intend to work overseas. It could also be valuable for media organizations to better train and manage their journalists overseas.

It’s also worth mentioning that this research studies a group of U.S. correspondents based in China, therefore the research findings may very well be distinctive to China and might not be representative enough to apply to countries that have a similar press system with the U.S.

Literature Review of the Project

Australian correspondent George E. Morrison of the British newspaper the Times was the first foreign journalist who started reporting in China around the turn of the 20th century (Mirsky, 1999). In the early years of the 20th century, the first wave of U.S. journalists acted in favor of China’s interests (Mirsky, 1999). The star of the second wave of American journalists was Edgar Snow, who soon rose to fame for his exclusive scoop with “Red Star Over China” (Mirsky, 1999).

The U.S. coverage of China in the 20th century “had a sense of mission and responsibility: to bring home the China story and to help transform China into a more modern, even democratic place,” which Mirsky (1999, p. 5) called the legacy of the 19th
century missionaries. Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, most American journalists were shut out of China, except for Edgar Snow and Louise Strong because of their favorable coverage of the Communist Party (Mirsky, 1999).

Gans (1980) argued foreign coverage emphasized on international affairs that affected Americans and the U.S. foreign policies. U.S. coverage of China does not only depend on what is going on in China, but also what is happening in the U.S. and what is happening to the diplomacy between the two countries (Song, 2012).

Until U.S. President Richard Nixon’s visit in 1972 and the subsequent normalized relations between the U.S. and China in 1979, most of U.S. coverage of China came from the then-British colony Hong Kong (MacKinnon, 2008).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of foreign correspondents based in China grew rapidly (MacKinnon, 2008). A large number of international correspondents migrated to Beijing and Shanghai after Japan began its slow decline (Landler & Sanger, 2013). According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, more than 400 foreign journalists are accredited to report in China as of January 2007, not to mention the number of journalists who cover China unofficially (MacKinnon, 2008). The number of accredited foreign journalists working in China had risen to about 900 in 2012 (Trouillaud, 2012).

The growing number of foreign journalists in China reflected China’s rising importance to news organizations when most U.S. news outlets reduced their foreign correspondents overseas (Carroll, 2006). However, little scholarly researches has been done on U.S. correspondents covering China. There are studies comparing news framing between the two countries, and there’s no lack of articles from former China-based journalists talking about their experiences. I have tried search terms “foreign
correspondents” and “China,” “U.S. journalists” and “China-based,” “foreign reporters” and “China,” “foreign journalists” and “China” in the Communication and Mass Media Complete database through the journalism library website and Google Scholar. In the end, I widened my search term to coverage from foreign journalists and included studies relevant to this project.

Wu and Hamilton (2004) collected 354 questionnaire responses from U.S. journalists based in foreign countries. They found foreign journalists in average are in their mid-forties and have more than 18 years of work experience, longer than their domestic peers. Ninety-six percent of the group has a college degree or better; 81 percent could speak at least one foreign language. Volz and Lee (2012) also touched on the elite nature of foreign journalists. Their study found out international reporting Pulitzer winners are more likely to be male, foreign-born cosmopolites and Ivy League graduates. Wu and Hamilton also found only 26 percent of foreign journalists are female, and nearly 83 percent identify themselves as white or European.

Between late 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese courted foreign reporters (Landler & Sanger, 2013). That trend changed when Chinese authorities felt the reportage of Tibet riot and Beijing Olympics in 2008 were mostly negative. The policy became even stricter after 2011 during the Arab Spring, fearing that could sow unrest in China (Landler & Sanger, 2013).

The dominant narrative of U.S. journalists reporting in China centers on the conflict of government censorship and foreign correspondents’ struggle to cover China freely.
In the early years after Nixon’s visit, the Chinese government controlled the Western coverage by lying, such as showcasing foreign journalists a model family who lived happily in a nice apartment (Mirsky, 1999). Foreign journalists had no access to places like Xinjiang or Tibet. Until 2007, foreign journalists needed to ask for permissions and explain where they wished to go, whom they planned to see and for how long if they wanted to travel outside of Beijing (Watt, 2008).

When reporters broke the rules, they were at best issued a warning and required to write a self-criticism; at worst, they were followed, threatened, interrogated and tortured (Mirsky, 1999).

In recent years, the common way for the Chinese government to exert influence on foreign journalists and their coverage is through forcing journalists out of the country or making it difficult for journalists to renew their visas.

When Al Jazeera reporter Melissa Chan was denied a visa renewal in May 2012, the news quickly caught the media’s attention. Chan is the first foreign journalist forced out of China since 1998. Al Jazeera (2012) said their request to replace Chan with another reporter was rejected, and the newspaper had to close its Beijing Bureau. Although no explanation was given, Zhang and Shoemaker (2014) suggested the reason went back to officials’ anger toward two human rights cases Al Jazeera reported.

Later in June, Bloomberg’s website was blocked after the publication of an article on the expanding business interests of current President Xi Jinping’s family (Landler & Sanger, 2013). Anything about the Politburo members is highly secretive, and therefore, anything that undermines the public image of Politburo members such as corruption is off the limit (Mirsky, 1999). In October 2012, a Pulitzer-winning article on the former Prime
Minister Wen Jiabao in *the New York Times* prompted China to block the newspaper’s English version as well as its Chinese version. Around the end of 2012, *the New York Times* reporter Chris Buckley was forced to relocate after he was refused a visa. Buckley still has yet to receive approval to return to China as a resident journalist and has resided in Hong Kong as of January 2014 (Reuters, 2014).

In 2013, *the New York Times* suggested that *Bloomberg* had curbed a story that exposed hidden ties between one of China’s wealthiest men and top political leaders in fear of repercussion (Wong, 2013). *Bloomberg* news editor-in-chief Matthew Winkler denied the accusation and replied that the story was not killed — it simply was not ready (Wong, 2013).

Another strong narrative surrounding foreign coverage of China is that the content has long been criticized as biased and over-simplified by Chinese elites, Western scholars and individual China-based correspondents (MacKinnon, 2008).

In 2008, a homespun, six-minute-long video “2008 China Stand Up!” criticized what the video producer believed distorted coverage from Western media on the Beijing Olympics and Tibet riot. The video drew more than a million hits and tens of thousands of favorable comments in the first week and a half (Osnos, 2008). A graduate of one of China’s most prestigious universities Tsinghua registered a website www.anti-cnn.com (Pierson, 2008).

Goodman’s (1999) content analysis of coverage from prestigious media outlets in the decade after the Cold War concluded the coverage was more independent, varied and less ideologically driven than previous reportage. However, another content analysis of *the New York Times’* and *Los Angeles Times’* China coverage found that although the
volume of coverage had increased, the overall tone remained consistently negative across
time (Peng, 2004). Many Chinese urban elite believed many important stories about
China were untold and ignored by the Western media (MacKinnon, 2008).

Zhang and Shoemaker’s (2014) study on the relationships among Chinese
officials’ openness, foreign reporters’ aggressiveness and the valence of foreign media
coverage of the Chinese government suggested “foreign reporters’ pre-formulated
attitudes toward the Chinese government affected their coverage of China” (p. 121). Also,
they noted their attitudes could change if the Chinese officials become more transparent.

Guo (2012) interviewed 12 foreign correspondents (five from the U.S.) based in
China and asked them what they think of Chinese scholars’ general perception of western
coverage in 2008, which they perceive as too negative. Foreign journalists responded that
“news distortions do exist, particularly in news pictures and headlines, and these are
made by their editors sitting in New York or London, who know little about the
complicated reality in China” (p. 82). However, they argued that they were denied access
after the Tibet riot broke out and their coverage could be better if they had been granted
access.

Roughly one in three foreign correspondents among the 354 respondents said they
were disappointed at current quality and quantity of international news covered by U.S.
media (Wu & Hamilton, 2004). The respondents cited a lack of resources, inadequate
editorial support, insufficient interest from the audience and the trend to sensationalize
news as the reasons behind their disappointment.

Guo’s (2012) study compared views on western coverage of Chinese scholars and
China-based foreign journalists. The Chinese scholars believed media should contribute
to social stability and promote cultural exchange. Also, they argued excessive negative coverage ignored the improvement China had achieved. On the other hand, foreign journalists interpreted this reasoning as press censorship and were frustrated when they were told a journalist’s job was to promote a harmonious and stable society.

People from different countries hold different interpretations about the function of press. Merrill (2000) pointed out that developing countries view order as more important than freedom in media.

“In many parts of the world there is not the simple choice between dictators and democrats, between authoritarianism or liberalism. Perhaps the choice is between bad dictators and better ones, between some freedom and much freedom. Many nations have learned that evil and corrupt leadership resides in so-called democratic systems as well as in authoritarian ones” (p. 49).

Merrill ended with the note that “more and more societies want security, stability, and social accountability” (p. 49).

Gans (1980) defined ethnocentricity in U.S. news coverage as an inherent superiority in one’s ethnic group or culture and a tendency to see other races and cultures from one’s own. Gans wrote that international news reflected culturally based values of journalists. Chomsky (2000) agreed that Western correspondents focused heavily on liberal concepts of freedom, democracy and a free press.

Winfield and Kalyango (2006) applied Gans’ (1980) four values (ethnocentricity, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism and individualism) in their content analysis of U.S. magazine coverage between 2004 and 2005 on China. They found that recent coverage emphasized the lack of free expression of the press, limitations to individual
thinking and personal choice in China. It focused more on China’s economic prosperity and human rights issues. Also, the exotic unknown and China’s mimicking of Western styles and fashion tended to be hot topics as well. Their conclusion suggested journalists still see the world through the lenses of their home country no matter how long they use a different language and learn the history and customs of the new society.

In comparison with the public’s anger at large media corporations such as CNN, the success of Peter Hessler provides an interesting case study. Hessler first spent two years with the Peace Corps in the small town of Fuling near the city of Chongqing. From 2000 to 2007, he was the New Yorker’s staff writer based in China. Two of the three books Hessler published are translated into Chinese and enjoyed huge successes. His first book *River Town: Two years on the Yangtze* is a recount of his experience in Fuling. *Country Driving*: The Chinese version of his third book, *A Chinese Road Trip*, has sold more than 100,000 copies in one year after its publication in 2011 (Shi, 2012). His every article published in the New Yorker was quickly translated into Chinese and circulated through the internet (Tang, 2011). His articles and books were well received among the Chinese public partly because he writes about China from his nuanced personal observation and understanding of the history and culture behind the social phenomenon.

The question for journalists based in China is not just what type of journalists they want to be, but much more specifically: what type of journalists they want to be IN CHINA, while facing massive industrialization, unchecked environmental pollution and a wholesale, redefining of a culture by a fast-growing economy and controlling government? How could they report within a complex country in a way that makes the maximum impact without comprising journalistic integrity?
Methodology

In-depth interviews are one of the main research methods in data collection. “An interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose. It goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views in everyday conversations, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3).

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 48) summarized two analogies to describe in-depth interviews: the first one is called the minor metaphor, which means the interviewer takes up a minor’s role and digs up knowledge like buried metal; the second one is called the traveler metaphor, which means the interviewer takes a journey with the subject, and the meaning is interpreted along the way.

Like every other method, in-depth interview has its benefits and disadvantages. It is useful when the interviewer wants detailed information from personal accounts and explores issues with depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006). This method provides much more in-depth information than methods such as surveys, informal interviews and focus groups (Johnson, 2002).

However, the researcher plays the active role of a sense-maker and interpreter of what is seen and heard in in each research project (Johnson, 2002). Therefore, the result of the project depends on the researcher’s own understanding, reflections, sincerity, authenticity and integrity (Johnson, 2002). The disadvantages of in-depth interviews are getting biased answers and limited transferability (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Moreover, in-depth interviews are time-consuming and could be misused if the interviewer is not properly trained (Boyce & Neale, 2006).
Despite in-depth interviews’ many imperfections, whether it should be used depends on specific projects. The method usually concerns getting information that is extremely personal, such as life experiences, values and decisions, occupational ideology and cultural perspective (Johnson, 2002).

My project is built on individual journalists’ personal experiences and reflections. An in-depth interview is a good fit for this project to dig deep information. Subjects with little media exposure might feel uncomfortable due to their lack of experience and become vulnerable to a sense of losing control in front of a camera. However, my subjects are all experienced journalists who have done numerous interviews themselves. They know very well how media works and the on-the-record protocol. My identity as a journalism student gives me the leverage to talk to them as an insider. It is important that the interviewer displays the confidence as a professional (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). It is I who should be aware of the possibility of letting my subjects lead the interview.

In-depth interviews require curiosity and respect for the subjects as individuals (Thompson, 2000). Also, it is crucial for the interviewer to build rapport with the subjects and create a climate of trust (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). Interviewing journalists is no easy task. It takes a huge volume of homework to prepare for interview questions and familiarize with the subject’s work and the way he or she works.

An in-depth interview is an intense experience. A physical interaction is the essential context for a flexible, interactive and generative interview, in which both parties explore meaning and language in depth (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). A face-to-face interview is always better than a phone interview or Skype interview. In-depth interviews
not only interpret the language, but also the hesitations, emotions and body languages that say something about the subject and the topic (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003).

I plan to have the first interview with my documentary subject after spending three or four days observing him or her work. Although interviews are the fastest way to get to know someone, I don’t want to conduct the interview unless I feel I know enough about one person to take full advantage of the interview. Since I will spend three weeks with my subjects, the project itself requires a lot of time investment from my subjects already. I plan to have only two interviews with them (unless I necessarily need a third one). Depending on their schedule, the first one takes place in the middle of the first week, and the second one will be around the end of the third week. The first interview might take one hour and a half to two hours. The second one will probably take an hour to an hour and a half. Certainly I would chat with them if we happen to be taking a car ride or having dinner together, but that won’t count as official interviews. These chats would more likely to be conversation without a planned purpose or structure. I might ask questions stemming from my observations, but my subject will be the one who leads the conversation.

It is important to show my subjects that I have done my homework, and the interviews are not a waste of their time. I will list my questions and include them in my field reports.

For my research proportion interviews, I will ask for two hours with each journalist. If they don’t have that much time, one hour would be fine too. (For on-camera interviews, that does not include the set-up time. I will get to the meeting place an hour in advance to set up and test.) Since I don’t have time to observe and build up rapport with
my subject before the interview, preparing interview questions and pacing the interview is even more important.

The in-depth interview focuses on the subject’s personal accounts while the observation complements it by offering the researcher a different angle to understand the subject. Combined with interviews, observation gives the researcher a chance to look for confirmation, contradiction and nuance.

As a research method, there is no agreement on its origin. Some researchers suggested its first use in ancient time, whereas others argued anthropologists first used it to collect data firsthand in the late 19th and early 20th century (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). There’s also no agreement in its definition. However, what all definitions share is “to study and understand people within their natural environment” (Baker, 2006, p.173).

Researchers summarized different roles a researcher can play. Despite the level of involvement, the researcher needs to remain detached enough to analyze the situation (Baker, 2006). Baker also noted that the role selection depends on the research question, the subject’s willingness to be studied and researcher’s prior knowledge of the subject’s world.

Spradley (1980) defined the nonparticipant role as no level of involvement with the insiders (the researcher is not even present at the scene). In the complete observer role, the researcher is at the scene but does not participate or interact with the subject other than to listen and observe (Spradley 1980; Gold, 1958).

Gold (1958) and Pearsall (1970) described the observer-as-participant role as having more observation than participation. While still mostly involved in observing, the researcher could ask some short questions. Pearsall (1970) believed this role allows the
researcher to have the sweet spot of having enough access without getting too intimate. However, the downside of this role is the potential misunderstandings resulted from brief interviews, of which the researcher might not be aware at the time (Gold, 1958).

In the moderate or peripheral membership role, the researcher wants to maintain a balance between an insider and outsider (Spradley, 1980) and have greater involvement (Adler & Adler, 1994). In a participant-as-observer role, the researcher could become friends with their subjects, and that relationship could be beneficial to help the researcher get intimate access to the subject’s world (Pearsall, 1970). However, Gold (1958) saw this role problematic for getting too close. The last role researchers identified is complete participation, in which the researcher becomes the insider (Spradley, 1980; Adler & Adler, 1994). This role gives the researcher full access, but the concern is that the researcher loses objectivity as a consequence (Gold, 1958; Spradley, 1980).

The observer-as-participant role is a good fit for my project for it allows me to have a certain level of intimacy with my subjects with some distance. My identity as a journalism student who inspires to become a professional journalist automatically put me in the insiders’ world. However, my purpose to conduct a master’s project signals my distance as an outsider to observe, not to participate. Since this project circles around my subjects’ personal reflections, it is impossible to not engage in conversations with my subjects. However, unless I have specific questions or my subject wants to talk, I will not start a conversation during observations.

Ethical issues are raised in observation for potential abuse of the subject’s privacy (Adler & Adler, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989). I will discuss access with my subjects before filming. Normally, it is hard for anyone to ignore the camera on a tripod with wireless
mics on. I do not show my subjects the footage during the filming process. But I will show them the final version before I publish any piece. If they tell me any footage is too private to show, I will talk to my committee members and decide. Hypothetically, I will not change any edit because my subject changes his or her mind or wants to look good. However, I respect them, and I want to listen to their feedbacks before I publish anything. Moreover, this is a project about their experience. It is important that I get their story right. Their feedbacks are the most effective way to make sure I don’t misrepresent them.

Adler & Adler (1994) suggested researchers should employ a number of techniques (such as the five senses) to collect data. They also suggested that researchers conduct their observations “systematically and repeatedly over varying conditions” (p. 381), namely to observe at different times and places to ensure the widest range of situations. Ideally, I want to be the fly on the wall — to be there as long as possible.

The limitation of observation is the researcher’s personal bias, which could lead to selected observation or subjective interpretation of situations (Baker, 2006). Scholars suggest researchers to engage in self-reflection actively, even challenge the researcher’s own expectation and explanation through negative cases (Adler & Adler, 1994; Johnson, 1997). After filming everyday, I will write down my observations and reflections. Also, I will file weekly field reports to discuss any ethical issue or confusion I have during the course of my project.
Bibliography


Appendix B: Interview Transcripts

Interview with Ian Johnson

Date recorded: September 11

Introduction: Ian Johnson, 52, is a Pulitzer-Prize winning correspondent, writing for The New York Times, The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker and other publications. He is also an advising editor of the Journal of Asian Studies and a senior policy fellow at Merics, a Berlin foundation specializing in China. Johnson has spent about half of the past thirty years in the Greater China region, first as a student in Beijing in 1984 to '85, and in Taipei from 1986 to 1988. He later worked as a correspondent in China from 1994 to 2001, first with Baltimore's The Sun and then The Wall Street Journal, where he covered macro economics, China's WTO accession and social issues. He studied and reported from Berlin between 1988 and 1992, covering the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification for Baltimore's The Sun and other newspapers. He moved back to Berlin in 2001, where he served as The Wall Street Journal's Germany bureau chief for five years, heading coverage of European macro-economics, introduction of the euro, Germans economic restructuring, and social issues such as Islamist terrorism. He returned to China in 2009. (From Johnson’s website)

Johnson: So I was born in 1962 and I went to University, not intending to study Chinese. So I was thinking about studying journalism. I was interested in writing. I wasn’t very focused. And I had taken a language class and just for fun I took Chinese because I thought it would be I don’t know different or something. Just for fun and you know, the requirement was you had one foreign language for a year and I thought a year of Chinese. And maybe also because my father was working for a Hong Kong company at the time.
Maybe that had some impact on me. I don’t know exactly. So I took a year and I really liked it. I had a very, very good language teacher who was from Taiwan, I mean, he was a waishengren, not a mainlander because he’s from Taiwan. And he was a very good teacher and I… they had a study abroad program. And so I thought sure why don’t I go to China and take a language class there. Because I thought, well I know, I studied, so I grew up in Montreal in Canada. I speak French and I know that it is important to have the environment, just very important where you are studying. So I thought I really should go to China. They had a study abroad program. So I went to China in 1984, 85, and then I came back. And then I realized I had so many, I had so many, so I could really just major in Asian studies. So I majored in Asian studies and I had… I knew I wanted to go back, but I wasn’t sure. I wanted to go back to China. But at that time, it wasn’t so easy for to go to China because it was very bureaucratic. It was still so. Just ten years after the Cultural Revolution. And so my, my teacher had been in Taiwan, so he’s just like go to Taiwan. So I went to Taiwan. And studied Chinese there for two years. So I had an interest in China before becoming a professional journalist but around the same time. But I knew I always wanted to go to China to be a correspondent. And I didn’t stay in the United States. I guess there was two ways you can go. One is you work in a local newspaper. And then hope you get at a big newspaper and maybe that newspaper has a bureau in China and then you can go to China. But that’s a very time-consuming process. And I hoped to sort of jump-start that by going abroad on my own. I think now it’s a lot easier to do that because in China you know, you can get tourist visas much more easily. It was a little more difficult in the past year or two. But basically you can find a job. You can intern at a newspaper or you can do all kinds of things like that. It was a little harder
though years ago. But cause there was just not that many ways to go to China. But those were my goals and I did come back with the *Baltimore Sun* in 1994. And then I lived here for seven years. And then I left in 2001 and went to Germany. And then I came back here in 2009. So yeah. I don’t know. How did it change me?

Zou: No, I was gonna ask you that you said you know you wanted to be a correspondent in China? When did you know that? Did you know that before you come to China or after your stayed in China for, you know, as a university student?

Johnson: I guess it was even … before. Maybe before even, cause there was this book were just coming out at that time. But the first wave of correspondent to been in China in the early 1980’s, there were three or four books that came out. One was by this guy called Fox Butterfield. Fox like the animal, Butterfield. It was called *China Alive in the bitter sea*. And another one was by husband and wife Linda and Jay Matthew. And they wrote a book called one billion. And there was another book by this guy Richard Bernstein. He still writes a bit about China. And he wrote a book called from the center of the world or something like that. And he was a *Time* magazine correspondent. Fox Butterfield was with the *New York Times*. And Matthew was with the *Los Angels Times* and *Washington Post*. So all these books were coming out and I was reading them in college and thinking that was great. So yeah, you know, it was. So before I got here I wrote my senior thesis on foreign journalism in China.

Zou: Really?

Johnson: Yeah, just like you, I interviewed all these journalists, I visited them and did interviews and wrote about it. And I did some more like, I did some research on other people who’ve written about journalism or China before. So I kind of knew, yeah, I knew
what the pros and cons, what the restrains were; I knew what the problem was working here. I think when I did come here in 1994 as a correspondent. I think I had a pretty good idea what problems might be working here.

Zou: So did your view change in terms of you know what the pros and cons are and what the problems are? Do you think differently now?

Johnson: Well, I mean China has changed quite a bit right? So things have definitely changed in China. And it’s not, it’s not as difficult as it used to be to work here I believe. It’s easier to work here now actually. Despite all the challenges that we read about, but you know, it used to be very much harder. And I think we have much more information, we have much more access. The living conditions are of course better for Chinese people and foreigners, for everybody. China is better. I think it is possible to do more interesting articles. I think you can and I think this is something that’s kind of changed. It’s possible to do interesting books and magazine articles on China nowadays because in the past you know I say in the past, in the 1980’s, when I did my senior thesis. This was again, when you think of it, just quite amazing, only eight years after the Cultural Revolution ended. I mean, eight years wasn’t that much time. I didn’t think of it like that. I thought the Cultural Revolution was a long time ago. But it actually wasn’t really a long time ago. And China was still very strictly controlled. And everybody worked for a Danwei. And you had everyone living in a housing compound. And there was guard out front. When you went into the compound, you had to get off your bicycle and maybe sign in. So if I went to visit any one in the housing you had to like it was a big deal if they knew a foreigner coming to visit, there were no public spaces. So nobody went a restaurant. There were not cafés. There were no teahouses. There were no places to really meet
people. People ride bicycles. So it was harder to meet people and spend time with them. But now, I mean, there’s all kinds of possibilities. You travel all around China; you can gang out with people. Nobody really cares. Well, they may care if you are doing a sensitive article. But I mean if you just want to go and spent time with somebody, and they are ok with that. Then you can go and hang out with them for days or weeks at a time you know. There were people like Peter Hessler who write books sort of based on that method. And that’s what I did in my first book on China, also sort of similar in depth profiles of people over a long period of time. And so I think the conditions here have changed radically. So yeah, I mean I think if you want to say what’s the saying, I think the saying is the same problem in other countries as well. But 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, Sinicism, 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 just 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. On the other hand, and again, 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’s 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.

Zou: So I know you moved to Berlin in 2001 right. And then you moved back to China again in 2009. So why did you come back? What keeps you coming back to China?

Johnson: China is an evil cult that will not let me leave. (Laugh.) It’s a xiejiao (evil cult). Why? Well. No, I think China is one of those places where I’m very interested in the
I like working in China. And it’s sort of what I do I guess. What I think it’s one of things I do better. I like working in Europe. And our home is in Germany. My wife is German. That’s where our home is. And I can work there also. But I think we both, both she and I are, have something to do with China. She’s German, but she does Chinese medicine, and she’s a Zhongyi right? She has some practice from Chinese medicine. And so we are all involved in China in one way or another. Yeah, I think also China is ... It’s not like a war story or some like... It’s... Some of these stories, some of these places in the world, there may be more news-driven like daily news-driven, like you are in the Middle East and you are covering Gaza. You know, you could probably not know too much about Gaza or Israel and still do an ok job because there are so much sources of information. Everybody talks there, and you know a bomb lands and blows up and kills somebody and then you rush out there, and do the article, interview people and rush back to the office and type the article. It’s kinda like that everyday. And I think in a place like China, it’s more of even though the change in China is so fast, but in a way, the stories are longer-term actually. The change is from day to day to day. It’s not a news event story. So I think that’s better for journalists who do have some experience here, I think they can make a difference or they can distinguish themselves better or you know it’s harder to cover actually I think China. I mean maybe that’s just me saying that because it’s in my self-interest to say that. I do think it’s harder to cover it than maybe other places like a war. I mean places like wars and crisis are difficult to cover because they are physically demanding or they require courage or things like that. And I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t be a war correspondent. I don’t think I can walk around with all these equipment
and trek after soldiers and stuff like that. But I think China’s something it’s better for me, for my personality, more analytical, more interested in trends and stuff like that.

Zou: So what interests you the most about China?

Johnson: Well, you mean, the stories I’m most interested in I guess are about values, peoples’ searching for values, peoples’ searching for … you know. Now that the basic problem of survival are solved for most people. Of course there’s still a hardcore poor group of people in China. But for most people, the basic shelter and clothing and food have been solved. So people are looking for different values. What it means to be Chinese? What is China bringing to the world? What is our culture? What it means to be Chinese? How do we want to live our lives? What kind of values do we have? Includes politics but it’s not really about dissidents and stuff like that. But a more broader question. So that to me is interesting. And those are kind of the topics I’m interested in writing about.

Zou: So how do you see your role as a foreign journalist in China? Does that make sense to you? Do you see yourself as an observer for example? Or something different? Something else?

Johnson: Yeah, I think I’m more like an observer. I’m not an activist. I don’t think it’s my job to change China. I think especially in a big country like China, one person certainly, probably is not gonna change things. I think also foreigners have been interested in coming to China and changing China for centuries right? Started with missionaries and stuff like that. There was actually a really good book by Jonathan Spence. It’s called To Change China. It talks about all these foreigners who came to China to change it. You know most of them failed. They all failed. Basically that’s the
point of the book. I don’t mean to be phylestic. I think it’s more effective to be an observer. I try to be not get angry or upset or whatever because it’s sort of. I don’t want to passive and but I do think it’s probably... No one is objective of course. We all have our biases. We all have our ways of looking at things. We all have, the way we grew up, the values we have. There’s no such thing as pure objectivity. I try to be... I mean I care about China; I’m interested in the place a lot. There are some things about China that I really love. But I do think and maybe this is also part of being a foreigner in Chinese culture. But I’m like an outsider. And it’s like... It’s never possible for me even if I wanted, it’s never possible for me to be an insider. 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. So I think it’s important to keep a distance.

Zou: Does it bother you though to be an outsider?

Johnson: Yeah. Well. Not really. So I was born in Canada. And then when I was in high school, we moved to United States. So I don’t have so much a clear homeland like some people do maybe. So from a personal point of view like, I’m writing for Americans but sometimes I don’t really know what an American think because I’ve only actually lived in United States for a total of 10 or 12 years. I’m 52. I’m 52 right? So I lived in China for about the same amount, a little bit more you know. It’s becoming a bit more I lived in China, maybe 13 or 14 years. And I’ve lived in Germany about the same amount of time, something like 12 years. I lived in Canada for 15 years. So I don’t... There’s not like a place that I identify as my homeland so much. So therefore I’m used to a little bit stateless or homeless. Oh, I’m so sad, I have no home. (Laugh.) No, not really. I don’t feel so bad. I don’t feel like it’s a problem for me that I have that outsider view cause I have the same thing in United States. Like when I’m in the United States, I have a U.S. passport and I have U.S. citizenship and I think I, you know, like a lot of things in United States, but it’s not really my homeland because there’s a lot of things in United States I don’t get.

Zou: How would identify yourself then? Would you call yourself a Canadian or?

Johnson: I mean I don’t know. Normally it depends on who I’m talking to. Haha.

Zou: So if I were to introduce you to for example a group of audience, should I introduce you as a Canadian journalist Ian Johnson?
Johnson: Yeah, maybe. The problem with that is I haven’t lived in United States since, no, in Canada, since I was a child. So I have some childhood memories. But I have teenage memories or something like that. But I never worked there as an adult. I never lived there as an adult. So it’s a bit different. I visited... you know I have relatives there. I go back once a year, and I normally see people. But it’s not really like… But when I’m talking to Chinese frankly, some ordinary people, sometimes it’s more convenient to say I’m from Canada because people would just be like, oh Canada, that’s a friendly, neutral country. There’s not like a lot questions you know, just simpler. Dashan and Baishun or something like that. And you can just go ok blah blah balh. If you say you are an American, then it becomes kinda complicated. Then it’s kind of like, oh, some people will say good or bad or why is America the police of the world blah blah blah blah. You get all these discussions. So you kind feel sometimes it’s just easier to have that Canadian identity. So yeah. But I don’t write for Canadian publications for example. So I don’t really… You know my journalist, when I came here the first time in the 1990’s, I had just naturalized. In fact, I got my first passport at the U.S. embassy in China. So when I came here, I came with my Canadian passport. So my journalist card said Canada. So I was officially a Canadian journalist. And then when I came back this time, I came back with my U.S. passport. So now I have American on my journalist ID card, my visas on my U.S. passport. So yeah, that’s…complicated.

Zou: I know you worked in Germany for so long. Was that experience different than working in China?

Johnson: Yeah, I mean, I think in Germany, yeah, I mean, in Germany, I was in Germany for some very dramatic period of time from 1988 to 1992. And I saw the Berlin Wall fell
and Germany unified, there was a lot of going on. Of course it is easier to work in a
country like Germany because you know, officials feel obligated to return your phone
calls and give you information. You know, it’s just an open society. It’s different right?
It’s obviously easier. But otherwise, I mean, for me, it’s also easier to blend in in
Germany or something like that. I mean people if they just look at me in the street, they
probably think that I’m German unless I open my mouth. Then I speak German, but I
have a heavy accent.

Zou: So do you report differently in different countries? I mean you worked in the U.S.,
in Germany and in China. Is your method, how you approach sources, how you approach
a subject, is that… Do you do that differently or no?

Johnson: Not really. I tend to think most articles that I worked on. I work on longer-
term projects. And I always sort of… I make the analogy when you are cooking s stew or
something like that, you add ingredients that maybe you or doing a puzzle you do a little
bit. You find some pieces of the puzzle, and then you put it aside and you work on
something else. And then you go back to that one. Now you realize how to do this. At
some point, you finish it. But you don’t sort of… I think the hard thing of working abroad
for a lot of journalists is that everything doesn’t happen quite quickly. I think in United
States, United States is probably one of the easiest countries in the world to be a reporter
because it has probably, I’m sure, I’m pretty confident to say the most open record laws
that has most data, law or data available publicly on people. Like it’s amazing what you
can find out in America. You can find out peoples’ property records. In Germany, it’s not
possible cause there’s privacy issue. But in United States, you can find out you know
who owns that house in the corner, and how much they paid for it and when they bought
it, and if they have a mortgage on the house, how much is the mortgage. You can find all that out. It’s public. That kind of stuff, so if you try to investigate a mistress Smith from the school board or the county council, or whatever some local official, you have a lot of information at your exposal, public records or you know corporate records, all the stuff online. And then also Americans are kinda used to dealing with the media, they talk. If you show up on somebody’s front door, and say I’m doing a story about blah blah. You know, some people will slam the door in your place. But a lot of people will just say oh yes, fine, blah blah talk talk talk talk. Americans like to talk and tell stories about themselves. You know it’s often hard to get Americans to shut up sometimes. But in China, I mean Chinese are more talkative than people realize. And most people are very hospitable. But it’s you know the amount of information you get publicly is tiny. And in Germany, it’s similar. It’s actually surprisingly similar for different reasons, for privacy reasons. You can’t get a lot of stuff. And then I think maybe more importantly is when you are writing about a foreign country, the stories tend to be sort of broader pictures. Nobody wants to know, like say the corruption in China you know. Xi Jinping is arresting these officials for corruption right? We all know that. Even for the *New York Times*, nobody is gonna want a story every day on every official who gets arrested right? It’s like too much. Ok, Mr. Wang gets arrested; then the next day is Mr. Li. And then the next day is Mr. someone else you know. After a while, it’s like who can keep all this straight? So what you really have to do is probably every couple of weeks or once a month, try to find some theme or some topic and say ok here is what it means. They arrested 50 people, and this means Xi Jinping is doing this or that or something like that. So you do more interpretative stuff. I think you are trying to explain that country whereas
and you have to give more context. Maybe that’s where people say there’s more bias, or there’s more interpretation right? If you are writing at home, probably for any newspaper, if you are a Chinese for a Chinese newspaper or a German working for a German newspaper or an American working for an American newspaper in the United States, you wouldn’t have to put this much context. It would be just newsworthy that someone is getting arresting. You would just write about those arrests. You wouldn’t have to explain too much. Your readers would know already some stuff. They would have the context. They would have the background to make sense of a lot of it probably right? Newspapers of course they do analysis stories on Obama’s foreign policy or something like that. I think when you are abroad, you have to think more broadly about stories. And that’s why there aren’t as many stories that you can just do in one day. So sometimes, some reporters, who have been very good reporters at home, they come abroad, and they are confused because they expect to have you know a quick reward like go out interview somebody and come back to the office and write the article and finish. At the end of the day, they have this success feeling, the feeling of success you know. Chenjiugan. Whereas you know when you are abroad, it’s often not like that. You go to interview somebody. You don’t understand what it was all about. You come back home. You are frustrated. Oh what did that mean? Is that guy representative? Is that important or not important? And then you go in another interview. It’s like these two don’t make sense. They are contradicting each other. And then you do some more interviews, talk to some experts or something like that. Then you read some books or something. Then you go, now I understand. And then you can write the article. But it normally takes more time. I think that’s a big difference working. But I think it’s the same in Germany as in China. I
think maybe Germany is a bit easier because if I want to find an expert on German corruption for example, I can more easily find university professors, people who will definitely speak to you. They will speak to you immediately on the phone. Whereas in China, you know, they don’t know who you are. They want to meet you. So maybe you have to arrange a meeting. And then I’m here in Chaoyangmen, and I have to go to Beida (Peking University) to meet somebody. And that takes two hours to get out there to meet the person. Then two hours back. The whole day is gone. And I haven’t met the professor right? And those are, it’s more time-consuming. Sometimes it’s a little more frustrating,

Zou: Do you think is there a risk when you are trying to explain the context? For example, to the American audience? That you could be wrong?

Johnson: Oh sure. For sure. I think they always say that journalism is the first draft of history. And probably there’s 20 drafts of history. So journalism is only the first draft. So definitely there’s a lot of mistakes. We look at stuff and like Xi Jinping’s corruption. Just to go back to this example, his campaign against corruption. What does it really mean? Is it really just he’s going after his enemies? He’s trying to clean out? Or is he serious in fighting corruption? Can he build institutional structures for a long-term campaign against…? And many of these are things we don’t know. We don’t know what’s going on in Zhongnanhai. We don’t really know. We just see little things coming out here and there. Somebody gets arrested. Some people hear something and they tell you stuff. But they don’t really know. So it’s very hard to figure it all out. So I think, in China, there’s a much greater risk of making mistakes than say again say in Germany. In Germany, I think there’s you know a very vibrant press. That’s also a big difference between say Germany and China. In Germany, there’s very good newspapers. I can read the local
newspapers and I will have a pretty good idea on what’s going on in Germany. I mean my view will be different because I’m writing for an American audience. They don’t have a broader view. But I will know basically what Merkel is doing. I will know who she’s fighting with, who her enemies are. I will have a pretty good idea of what’s going on inside her office? But in China, it will be much more difficult. You can read local press. There are some good journalists and good local newspapers, and good magazines like Caixin. But there aren’t that many. Even they have restrictions on how they can do stuff. So on corruption, for example, Caixin is excellent because we think the chief editor Hu Shuli. She’s buddies with Wang Qishan. And probably Wang Qishan’s investigators are allowed to feed them little bits of information. Or she knows. She’s smart. She’s experienced. She knows these people. She knows how far she can push. Could she push a little harder? And so on. So they are very good. But still, exactly what Xi Jinping’s goals are and who his allies are, who’s working with him in Zhongnanhai, what people, who’s in his inner circle, who are his buddies from Fujian or Shanxi or wherever you know. We don’t know any of that really. So there’s a lot of guessing. So when we analyze stuff, you know, it’s quite possible to get it wrong.

Zou: So for you what’s the biggest frustration for you working in China?

Johnson: Obviously here are a lot of different frustrations and limits. But there are things that you accept. It’s like if you are on a big ship, I don’t know if it’s a good analogy. You cannot expect things to be what they aren’t. I find it pointless to complain about the Internet being slow or the air being bad or people not returning phone calls. I mean because they won’t and that’s just the way things are. So I just try to accept that. I think the disappointing thing is, I think there’s more hostility toward the foreign press and I
think especially this is maybe because I’m working for the New York Times. I mean, definitely there’s a lot of hostility toward the New York Times because of the Wen Jiabao article. And just generally, we have some people who said oh there’s some internal propaganda report analyzing the New York Times’ of coverage of pollution, proving that the New York Times is biased against China for pollution. It’s like you know, sometimes I think it’s carried excessively. I think that’s kind of kind of a pity. But I don’t think it matters too much because the government unfortunately very little… You can’t get interviews with the government. We try; we almost never do. So whether they like us or don’t like us, it almost doesn’t matter unfortunately. So I would like to know more, I would like to have more interviews with the government. I don’t expect to have an interview with Xi Jinping. Even in the think tanks that are linked to the ministry. I’m doing an article on agriculture. And I find it difficult to figure out the policy. And then you try to talk to the Fagaiwei, what you call it? You know they won’t talk. And the think tank associated with them won’t talk. And then the Shekeyuan, Nongyebu, they won’t talk. It’s just like, you have to like, keep reading newspapers and try to figure out what the government policy is. And I think sometimes this isn’t a big secret or it shouldn’t be such a sensitive issue. Everything can be sensitive in some degree. But this shouldn’t be. Ok agriculture, it’s not that... I’m not talking about Tibet, Xinjiang or terrorists or something like that. It should be a fairly neutral thing. And I just find that’s kind of frustrating. Kind of inefficient.

Zou: Yeah of course. Say when you said hostility. You mean from the government? From whom?
Johnson: Yeah. The ministry that we deal with the most directly is the Foreign Ministry. They issue our press passes, with their letter, we get our visas. So whether they like you or don’t like you kinda affects whether you stay here. And there’s a fair amount of hostility I think from the Foreign Ministry, especially toward the New York Times. But also, you know, in general, there was more of an effort a few years ago to have interviews if people have access to officials. It was actually much more open 20 years ago in that regard. 20 years ago, when I came here in 1994, the ministry officials, they will kind of try to get you interviews sometimes or help you meet people. And when you had, the little things, when they have the press conference with the premiere every year. He took open questions. Like not scripted. Now you exercise, you have to submit your questions ahead of time or something like that. But it was different actually back then. I mean there’s obviously reasons for that. One can analyze maybe why that is. But I do feel the government is less open. It’s strange because the rest of the time, it’s more open, like I said, you can travel around, I can get on an airplane tomorrow and fly to Sichuan and go talk to farmers all day long. But I can’t talk to anybody from the Ministry of Agriculture. That’s like silly.

Zou: What impact you think that has on foreign journalists and their reporting?

Johnson: I think the impact is that we… I mean, on the one hand, I can say that the government has like these ministries all have their newspapers. And reading the newspapers, the editorials, and you can get an idea what the government policy is. So it’s not like we don’t know anything. I think we lack maybe… I think actually officials in China have a difficult job. It’s a lot of hard decisions they have to make about what to do in China. It’s not… China has a lot of objective speaking problems. Big population,
environmental challenges, lack of water, need for faster economic growth. All these things. And it would be interesting to talk to officials. I think one would be more sympathetic actually. I think it would be interesting. Last year I talked to somebody who’s in charge of migration you know of a province. That was fascinating to talk to this person. It was quite admirable like how much work he did, how much time he spent in the countryside, how much traveling he did to these mountainous areas where these poor people lived. And I think it would be, to get a better idea, I think it would be good. But I think for most officials, they feel it’s too risky to talk to the foreign press. This is no upside. Like what’s in it for me? I talk to some guy. If I look bad, then my career is over or something is like. Because China is quite sensitive about how it appears in the foreign press. I think that’s probably the reason. I can understand it. If I were a Chinese official, I probably wouldn’t talk.

Zou: You majored in journalism when you were a student in the university of Florida. And you’ve worked in different countries. Has your view of journalism or the practice of journalism changed in any way? That’s a broad question I know.

Johnson: Has it changed?

Zou: How you think of journalism?

Johnson: I mean, I don’t know. That’s a good question. I’ve never thought about it. Actually I didn’t entirely study journalism. Just. I studied (Asian studies). What do I think about? I guess I realize how journalism is, is limited in what it can do. And the kinda things it can do. But I don’t… Yeah, I probably knew that before also. I’m not sure if that’s really new. But yeah, I mean I’m always reminded that journalism is very imperfect. And that it’s got all kinds of flaws I think.
Zou: Do you think that’s the same in any country? Even if say you report in Canada or America or there’s more limitations while you report in a foreign country? Was that different?

Johnson: Well I think because of the challenges working in China like we were saying earlier. It’s probably easier to make mistakes. So I mean I think in that sense that’s probably. Probably journalism is doing an ok job covering China. But there’s certainly a lot of flaws and how it’s done. I don’t know if there’s any easy solution. I think you know the problems in the media in general cutbacks. There’s more and more stringers being used and that sort of thing. So I think these are possibly compromising quality. I think this is probably another reason why there isn’t as much original work. There aren’t as many people… When I say everyone stuck in front of the computer, nobody goes out and does interviews. I think part of it is because of the cutbacks. People are under pressure to do more, and they may be blogging and doing three different, working for three different publications. Everything is kinda this fast turnaround. I don’t think it’s specific to China. But I think in a country like China, a big country like China, it’s important to get out. It’s like if you are in the Unites States, you know the always say being inside the beltway, that expression. It’s similar in China. You know you don’t wanna be inside the third ring road of Beijing all the time. It’s not an accurate picture of China. And I think that’s probably a bigger risk when covering a place like China because the reality on the ground is quite different than the reality you get from the computer.

Zou: I’m sure you’ve been asked about this question a lot. What do you think of the western coverage of China?
Johnson: Yeah, I guess it’s good in some ways. But considering the number of people who are here, there’s a lot of articles that are copycat articles I would say. Or very thinly reported articles where... Like for example, a reporter, a foreign reporter in Beijing sees something happen on Weibo. And then on the basis of that and a couple of telephone call does an article. And often it’s about some big thing on Weibo. Everyone’s talking about it. And therefore somehow this reflects public opinion in China. Or this is what the Chinese people are thinking. We all know of course Weibo is a very narrow, self-selected group of people. It doesn’t reflect the public opinion in China. And I think there’s a lot of work like that. I think also the reporting here is more driven by researchers and research assistants and fixers. I mean I think there’s something that isn’t, doesn’t get talked about a lot. That’s that you have a lot of people who don’t speak very good Chinese. They certainly cannot read and write in Chinese. And I think if you, if you put it this way, if you said 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. I mean maybe this person can do a good job. But maybe not. I think there’s a lot of that actually in China frankly. So yeah I mean that’s a real problem. But I think actually there’s a lot of work... So what happens is, this is like the dirty secret. I think this is the headline for your paper. The dirty secret is Chinese nationals, if you have a Chinese passport, you cannot write articles for the foreign press right? You cannot have a
byline. So if I am Wang Jun, the smart, young researcher working for the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal, and I do all the research and give it to you, the foreign correspondent, I can’t get a byline. So at most they get a credit line at the bottom: Wang Jun contributed to this report. But you don’t get the byline. It should be by Joe Smith and Wang Jun or even by Wang Jun and Joe Smith or just by Wang Jun, the credit line Joe Smith who did nothing. But what happens is the article is by Joe Smith, Wang Jun contributed to this report. And there’s a lot of stuff like that where you look at the interviews are often done by telephone by a researcher. Interview all the quotes come from the researcher, all the translation of the articles, and then maybe only this foreign expert who’s called up to give his opinion is done by the journalist. And so you know, you can say it’s the journalist’s idea. And maybe the journalist conceived it and wrote it you know. The researcher was kind just like the robot going to get information. Okay. But still if you were in the United States, that researcher would get a byline. And a lot of people would get single byline in China should get, would, if they were working in the same condition, I mean, in the United States, would get double bylines. And so that would actually, I mean, it doesn’t sound like that doesn’t play around, in terms of what the articles are like. The article is the same thing. But in terms of professional reward and stuff like that, I think it’s… 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 looks like people are doing more work. I don’t know. That’s something. It’s maybe a bit inside baseball or maybe more like Columbia Journalism Review ethics or something like that. I think it’s a real issue. Maybe it creates this kind of unhealthy dynamic for reporters who aren’t talking to people as much because they are just relying on the researcher. If you don’t do the interviews. it’s not just getting the information, not just getting the quote. A good interview gives you ideas for your next story. It broadens your mind. I mean often the interview it’s not good to say get me the quote from an expert saying the green production is a problem in China, okay? Then you can do that. You can find an expert, green production is a problem in China, said X expert. But a good interview, you get the quote maybe, but then you also get ideas for other stories. It broadens your horizon. Oh He also said this and that. This would make a good story. You can only do that if you do the work yourself. You can’t rely on other people to go on and do all the work for you. So the problem, the fixer thing, you tell and fixer, I need an expert to go and get me a quote in agriculture. They get the quote. That’s it. You just plugged it in like the piece to your puzzle. And you are finished. So I think there’s more of that in China. And I think that’s probably not a healthy situation.

Zou: Right. Right. Is that because the Chinese government? They don’t allow Chinese national to write for foreign press.
Johnson: That’s the basic reason I think. I mean I think that’s the reason. On the other hand, it doesn’t mean that you have to become lazy because the government has this policy. But it leads to that kind of…
Zou: Right. So how have you changed in terms of working abroad for so long? How has that experience affected you personally?
Johnson: Well. (Pause.) I don’t know. It hasn’t changed me. I’m the same person.
Zou: Really? Okay.
Johnson: No. Changed me. I don’t know. I don’t know what I was like before. A lot has changed.
Zou: Has your view of China, of United States, of the world, about life. Has that changed? Your perspective about people? You know, things like that.
Johnson: That is a good question I haven’t… It kind of requires some thought I guess. I have to think about that. Maybe I should send you a note and write some thoughts down. I don’t know. I mean, I’m not sure. 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 confusion, 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. So this is something that will probably come out of my book.

Zou: I look forward to reading it.

Johnson: Okay. I better run. Great talking to you.

The following questions are asked through emails.

Zou: Can you tell me one thing you have learned about yourself after working abroad for more than two decades?

Johnson: I think it's the answer I gave right at the end, by understanding even more the commonality between people.

Zou: You've witnessed the change China has gone through within the past two decades. What surprised you the most?

Johnson: how smoothly things have gone in China. There has been no tumult or unrest since 1989, and predictions that the CCP *had* to do political reform, or would perish, have so far not come to pass. In other words, most political reporting about China has been wrong!

Zou: I was told by a journalist who came to China around 2007 (before the Olympics) that she sensed optimism when she came. She felt that optimism has gone now, and she said a lot of journalists are leaving China. What do you think of this?

Johnson: I don't think this is statistically accurate. The foreign ministry publishes a handbook listing journalists each year. I don't know what the numbers are, but you could
check this. I think it's just that this person has been here seven years, which is typically when people get tired and want to go home. So instead of saying "I'm tired and want to go home," they construct a big narrative about how "China's at a turning point" and "others are doing it too" and so on!

Zou: Do you have any regret?

Johnson: Sure, but nothing unusual.

Zou: What advice would you give to journalists who plan to come to China or have just arrived in China in terms of how to learn about China better?

Johnson: Don't come if you can't speak Chinese. Best would be if you can read Chinese too. You won't learn here on the job—you'll be too busy—and you can't do real, value-added work if you can't speak the language.

**Interview with Mark Leong**

Date recorded: September 4

Introduction: Mark Leong is a fifth-generation American Chinese whose family emigrated from Guangdong Province to California more than a hundred years ago. After graduating from the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University in 1988, he was awarded a George Peabody Gardner Traveling Fellowship to spend a year taking photographs in China. In 1992, he returned to China as an artist-in-residence at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, sponsored by a fellowship from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation. He subsequently decided to make his long-term home in Beijing, where he has lived since, observing what changes and what remains the same in the world's most populous country. Leong's photos have appeared in *Time, Fortune, the New York Times, Business Week, the New Yorker, Stern,*
and *National Geographic*. He has received grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Fifty Crows International Fund for Documentary Photography. His book *China Obscura* won a special citation from the Overseas Press Club for photographic reporting in magazines and books in 2004. Leong's photographs first appeared in *National Geographic* in "China's Fossil Marvels" in the August 2005 issue. (Bio from National Geographic’s website)

ZOU: I know so my first question is I know you came here at a wonderful year, 1989, for a journalist I guess.

LEONG: It was interesting yeah. I originally came after the… I didn’t come before June 4. I came on June 5. So I missed out on all the excitements. Yeah.

ZOU: But you came that year, that was an interesting year.

LEONG: Yeah, it was a very interesting year. I was in Taiwan studying Chinese. And I was listening to the radio the reports of what happened here in Beijing. In May, April. May. You started to hear all these stuff. So I thought when I got here, it was gonna be all different. China is gonna be this open country and instead the exact opposite happened when I first got here. I got here on June 5. Everything was closed down. Everybody was scared. There’s soldiers, all you know, with martial law. And there were no foreigners.

You see, I have no idea how things were like in here in 1987 or 1988. You know, because everybody left. All the foreigners left. You know. All the teachers. Cause I was staying with a foreign teacher when I first got here. I was in Guangzhou, foreign teachers, a friend of a friend had a dormitory and they were, they all left. The Americans were, they were all told basically to evacuate. Because nobody knew what was gonna happen.

ZOU: That was after the event?
LEONG: It was May to June. I arrived on June 5. The people who I was staying all left. 
So I was all by myself. But I was in Guangzhou, it’s close to Hong Kong\(^1\) borders. Yeah.  
So I mean if bad happened I could just go back across the border. I wasn’t planning to go.  
I always planned to go the year before. But then I just decided I was gonna stay, make  
some money in America, tried to study Chinese in America, which is a mistake, I didn’t  
learn at all. So then you know, you better be prepared before you show up in China. But  
then I showed up in China, all that stuff happened. The interesting thing is that I think if I  
had come before, like if I’ve been there, I would try to be in Beijing and you know, cause  
that was the biggest news event in the world. And I was a young photographer, that’s  
how you made your as a photographer. I would have gone there, probably shot it, and if I  
had survived, if I had pictures I would’ve probably ended up doing that kind of  
photography, more like conflict type of photography. Cause what I am doing is more like  
daily photography because I’m more interested in doing it than actual conflict  
photography. But if I had gone there, you kinda started out and that kinda grew in that  
environment, I would be doing that instead.  
ZOU: You think so?  
LEONG: Yeah I think very likely. Cause I would’ve gone, I would’ve seen some action. I  
would’ve photographed it. If I had some pictures published, then I would have gone back  
to America. I would try using that as my basis of getting my jobs. Then that developed.  
ZOU: So you would be a different photographer, probably have a different life now?  
LEONG: Yeah, possibly. Who knows? I don’t know. But that’s, you know, you can’t  
relive your life and find out things if that’s. I imagine sort of how.  

\(^1\) In 1989, Hong Kong was still UK’s colony until 1997.  
\(^2\) China’s fourth of July, the Independence Day, a holiday with a week off nationwide
ZOU: Do you regret that?

LEONG: No, I’m glad I didn’t because I think staying in China and understanding more or trying to see what happens here. If I had gone in 1989, I would’ve freaked out. Seeing a movement wiped out just like that would probably be pretty disillusioning. I probably would not come back. Even after the first time when I came in 1989 for a year, it was on a fellowship, just to photograph right. Probably kinda similar to what you are doing, on the basis of a student, a graduate student project. So you know, by the time I left, I was pretty much like I’m never coming back here because it was difficult, you know, being in China for me you know… not just because what happened in Tiananmen, because of everything. Because it was just difficult as a foreigner, an American, you know, coming to China, I found it very difficult.

ZOU: Why did you come back then?

LEONG: Because as a young person, I was trying to find out about who I was, where I came from, and China is where I came from, who I could have been. These kind of questions, like questions about if I had gone to Tiananmen square, if I had come during the time, would I be a different person, the same thing. If my dad hadn’t come to America, who would I have been? That kind of questions interested me you know, hypothetical. And so. You know. After traveling here, wow, I’m kind of glad my family went to America. And I thought I would never come back.

ZOU: What were your first two years like here?

LEONG: I had a backpack; I had you know the little oxford dictionary, the red dictionary, I don’t know if you know it. It’s about an inch and a half thick, you know, a book about this big, I would just go around and use that and try to talk to people. And I
would just you know get on trains, buses, and have all my gears, and also I was shooting film. So shooting film, you got to bring it all in. And at that time, China was very unsophisticated. So they couldn’t believe that I was bringing in more than 40 rolls of films. These were films I’m supposed to use for months right. And these days I’m shooting 40 rolls in a day. They thought 40 rolls, they thought I was smuggling the films in. That’s, they were, just… They had to check each roll to make sure there was no drugs in it. Just all kind of stuff they do because they’ve never seen it. So I remember first time when I came in, I’m carrying these big bags of film and then I would shoot them and they would be undeveloped. The first time when I came in, this was before I was working as a journalist, I was on this graduate fellowship, documenting photographer. So I had plastic bags of film and I carried them around like undeveloped, freaking out. What if my films gets all messed up, you know, if it gets humid or it gets, you know, too hot or something. What’s gonna happen to them? So I was just very you know, it was… But you know, because I’ve never done anything else. Now coming from shooting digital when everything is convenient, you shoot and you get the pictures right away, you could send to New York you know within five minutes of shooting it. If I had go back to that era, I would just go crazy. I would never want to do it. But now it’s all I knew shooting film, saving it and developing it later, that’s, I was used to that. But it was very… So all that kind, all that hassle, you know for me, taking public transportation, taking hard seat, not speaking Mandarin. Now my language is kinda passable, I can get around. I still don’t have great Chinese, but certainly way better than it was back then. Then I was like just basically pulling out my dictionary and try to get people to give me certain kind of food you know or try to say how much does this train ticket cost. 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. But it didn’t make me love China more. It made me think, I can’t wait to get back to America. I mean, how old are you?

ZOU: I’m 25. How old were you?

LEONG: About the same as you are. I was about, I was 23.

ZOU: Yeah. You just graduated from college right?

LEONG: Yeah. So yeah, it was the first, actually the first trip I’ve ever done. I’ve never been overseas, I mean except for Canada or Mexico. I’ve never been out of North America. So it was... Yeah I mean, I didn’t think, I didn’t know if I would ever do it again. That’s just, that’s, yeah it was just, the interesting is not just, that’s what happened, not only my life changed. And I’ve gotten more able to cope with being here. China is changed a hell a lot. See you are 25. So you were already born then right?

ZOU: I was born in 89. The year (you came).

LEONG: So exactly. It’s...I mean, I’m sure your parents or cousins tell you how it was. Did they tell you? You can’t believe how it was.

ZOU: Back then where I live, it was all like farms. They grow cabbages out of the field.

LEONG: And that’s all people ate. People only ate cabbages in Beijing. You’ve heard this right? You’ve heard this? In Beijing?

ZOU: When?
LEONG: In the 90’s. People, all they have are cabbage. There’s no grocery store. It’s kinda, so that’s why I was kinda lucky to not ending up a conflict photographer and go wherever, Congo, I just stayed in China and I got to see this country that changed from a place you only have cabbage in the winter to just this mega-country, the superpower. That’s pretty amazing. That’s what keeps me here right. Still it’s difficult as a foreigner. I would still rather live in the States, in California if I had a choice. But you know, it’s very interesting here. You can’t see this kind of things in any place else. It’s massive through your lifetime. I mean, through 89 to now, it’s astonishing how fast things change. This Starbucks, this would be the nicest place in Beijing in 89. So this is the cleanest restaurant. People would line up to come here probably. And now it’s just a normal, normal thing. A most basic part, a very average part of China right?

ZOU: I always thought it’s so interesting to see that change. I mean I was a kid, I really didn’t get to see or understand any of that. But for you, I mean, for you being here since then, what it is like to witness all that and to be part of it to some point?

LEONG: I mean, because I was here, I kind of being here almost straight through. There were periods in the 90’s of which I kind of go back and forth. The first time I left in 1990 and I thought I would never come back. Then I came back in 92. I was out for a year and then I came from in 94 and I kind of stayed here for a long term till 1997. So yeah I mean yeah, you are kind of, you’d expect. It’s almost you are getting ready to things being...

Like for example, for Wangfujin, you would see shops of the most you couldn’t believe those shops opening up those modern sporting stores, something like that. They built it. Then two years later, they destroyed it because it’s not new enough. They built another brand new one. That’s the kind of thing that happened here. Cause I go back to
California, I visit there. The places that were there when I was a kid are still there right. The same library, the same shops are more or less kinda there. But here, it’s… You know, I go, I would go away for you know for the summer. I come back and there’d be you know all these places, I wouldn’t recognize streets cause they had dirt roads before. It could be highways. (Interrupted by a phone call.) That kinda stuff shows… So it’s kind of, you get used to that. You are used to the fact that you see a place, like a neighborhood, you get used to it might suddenly disappear. That was…. Because the places were just riding this wave, you know, just you know, constructing, construction, deconstruction just happen everyday you know. People being moved through places. You are in Chengdu, not in Chongqing, but you know the Three Gorges? The whole place, the whole town just evacuating. Oh we are gonna put the waters down. I was there when the water, when they started, when the water rising. I was there. You could see the water rising. You see geographical changes happening right in front of your eyes. Roads, water rising, you know, you, just happen without even... 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. You know it’s hard because I’ve been here all along. And it’s hard to step back and see it. I’m sure once I move. Cause I will move back to the States some time in the near future, once I step back. I mean, it will be pretty... It’s pretty awesome to think about it now. But I will probably be more… The perspective will be... Maybe even now like I look at my pictures, you know, I did this book with my pictures. I didn’t think of it as historical document. I thought that you know China was gonna stay like that. Okay Tiananmen square happened. This
country had this chance to become this, you know, to get out of this kind of, socialist kind of state, you know, stagnant socialist nation. They had a chance and they blew it. But no, actually it didn’t happen at all. It just kind grew and changed. 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.

ZOU: So I mean after living here for so many years, how do you understand China more now?

LEONG: Cause I have no, it’s hard for me (to say) because I have my perspective. There’s a lot more to understand. It’s hard for me to articulate specifically about how I understand…

ZOU: I mean, I guess, I don’t know if this question makes sense. How do you see your relationship with China? As a person and as a journalist?

LEONG: Cause... One thing I told you before is I’m not doing so much journalism here than I used to right? Whatever is happening, I was trying to keep track of what’s going on, and just jumping on that. Oh, something’s happening. You got to go see that.
ZOU: As a photographer, how do you see your or how do you see your purpose living here or you role?

LEONG: As a documentary photographer, I didn’t think of it when I was just taking pictures. I told you like, I came... I kinda backed into that. I didn’t expect that. I expect, as a young person taking pictures. You are taking pictures without… taking pictures of general thing. You think that’s cool. You don’t think, oh, 20 years later, that’s gonna be pretty interesting to look at. The world I’ve never seen because it’s all gone. It doesn’t exist anymore. So I see it yeah well 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 happens. So I guess I see myself more as that, you know, just getting down on how something was. Especially you, a specific place at a certain time how it was and to tell stories about that. That. I guess that’s what I still do. I now I always, now I have a better idea of what’s happening cause I you know I have pictures that are 20 years old. I look at them, oh yeah, that’s what happened, I did the pictures of that. That’s the fact of looking at it after I spent so much time. The fact that now I know what’s gonna happen or I hope what’s gonna happen. So but yeah I mean partially because the celebration, China to journalists, that’s probably not a place how fast things are. I guess in America, the speed changed. You saw the Internet because the Internet radically have big, that’s kinda like people don’t really use their brains anymore because you get your iPhone, your Google, you don’t use your brain anymore. And that’s kinda, that’s a fundamental change. China has all the changes that happened to the Unites states, going from socialism to capitalism as well as the Internet happening. So all these things. Yeah, I just I guess it’s more I have I mean. It’s partially
also being just because it’s so different. I’m not saying because it’s China itself, because China is very different from the West. So it’s becoming similar now. There’s a lot of crossovers, the Starbucks in a mall that looks like California. You know, it got the same brand as you would see in America. So things are converging. But also, still some of the differences do give me a better perspective. I mean, in a way it does, it has... When I originally came, I told you I was try to get a perspective of who I was, if I had not been an American, if I had been a Chinese-born. So I kind of have an idea you know who I could’ve been. Right? But I also knew better who I am. Because you can see by being in a place that is radically different from where you, where I was raised, which is you know the Bay area. I can, I see things I kinda don’t get. You know what I am saying? You went to Missouri right? You grew up in Chengdu right?

ZOU: Yeah.

LEONG: That was able to consolidate your personality, wasn’t it to some degree? You went over there, oh, I’m not this. This is what I am, this is not what I am. The core person you are, the parts that are hard to adapt; the parts you really know this is who I am. And I just don’t get this and I’m sure you feel that right? Being an outsider for so many years. You obviously have been… how many years have you been?

ZOU: Three years.

LEONG: Yeah, That’s a fair chuck of your time in a culture that’s not yours. And I you know, and I bet there are even less Chinese people in Missouri than there are Americans here for sure right? I can just kind of hang out with Americans all the time if I want to right? While you are on your own, surrounded by Americans, who are not the kind of people you interact with. It kind. That’s the kind of thing it does. It lets you know who
you are, you know, what's important to you, what parts you will change and what parts you won't change. And you know, that’s interesting, but also, not only was I, that I, the same thing is happening to you probably, not only are you willing to a complete different culture from your own, but you are going to at a crucial time in your life. You know, I was in China in my 20’s. I was like you know. That’s... so I’m also changing the same time. You become a new person at the same time. I mean, I wouldn’t say that it has given me… even though I still say it’s consolidating my feeling of being an American, it also gives me a little bit more understanding of where people are coming from. Cause I often look at things, I try to find what I think, what would I do. Sometimes I see somebody or I see some situations, I try to find like, the initial response is to say oh you know that’s not what I do, I don’t get that. That’s completely different. That’s strange. That’s wrong. Then you… These kind of exercises I go through that I try to find some, we do that kinda of similar, that something I for my culture had similar, the same mindset. I’m sorry I can’t give you a specific example. I can’t think of anything now. Like I told you I’m not doing a lot shooting right now. But you see something you say what are they thinking? Is that something everybody would think in the same situation? Or is that specifically Chinese?

ZOU: I see.

LEONG: I try to make that, if I were in the same situation, would I do the same thing or something completely different? Sometimes things are completely different. Most things are not. Most of the things are like, I can see why they do that. There are things I do very similar to that. I’m sorry I can’t (think of an example)... When I think of that, I will send you an email about that because that happens a lot. In a way, I’m kind of a journalist. I
don’t even consider myself a journalist. I consider myself a photographer right? I just happen to you know accidental. I just kinda happened to do (journalism). The pictures are useful to journalism. It turned out they are useful as historical documents. It just turned out. I just wanna taking pictures that were interesting to me. That looked cool to me. That said something to me, that said something about the order of the world or the lack of the order of the world that I could put in a frame. So I’m not just talking about things as a journalist. I’m talking about things about being a human you know. Being a human and experience something different. And that’s what you do right? Being a human, you see something different, you want to share with people. But I also want to share with people, I also want to come with my own perspective. You could’ve being doing the same thing. You could’ve being the same way. There’s two ways to look at things. There are always people who are so different from you. Look how different they are. These people, their behaviors are different. But maybe it’s because, if you see, if you are in the situation, maybe you would do something very similar, you actually do something very similar. Does that make sense?

ZOU: Yeah. You mentioned that there’s situation, you wonder, you have this question, whether I would do the same thing if I were that person going through what that person went through or that was specifically Chinese? Do you have an answer? Most of the situations, what’s your conclusion?
LEONG: Most of the time, yes, I would probably do the same thing ultimately. But then that’s what I’m saying you found core things that are different. Some core things, no, no, I would absolutely not do that.
ZOU: Do you have an example of that?
LEONG: I don’t mean to slam each other. There’s a lot of positive things. One thing I do know is how people treat each other here? Like when somebody’s like you know, when someone was biking along and they have their bikes loaded with all kinds of stuff, and they fall down in the middle of the road and nobody helps them. I can’t believe nobody helps them. I’m stunned by because if somebody stops in the middle of the road and their stuffs are all over the place. Just help them. Everybody, just you know, it takes three minutes of your time. You get down, you help them pick up their stuff, and off you go. You know. Or somebody is carrying a bunch of packages. Then you get through a door, and just like, somebody could hold the door open for that. Actually that’s gotten better, a lot better. But this is part of the core identity here. It’s just very disappointing to me you know. So that’s kind of the thing, that’s a negative perspective. People are talking about all like, like corruption right? The thing is corruption seems like negative. But you know, if that was the way to do, people like to give their kids in a better class, they bribe somebody or they bring them extra money or fruit or something like that, well, that’s the kind of thing, well, you know, there’s a version of that basically in America doing stuff to make some kind of favor, there’s a favor bank that exists in America, so it’s all guanxi here. You know who’s rubbing whose back. That totally exists in America, just in a different form. And like I would, I can see like this corruption, it’s part of the system. See that’s what I can kind of understand. Wow. There’s something like that exists in America. And I can see myself do some stuff that might be because that’s the way it’s done here, I can see that’s useful, because that’s the way. So that’s not a positive example. But like Americans are often very critical about China that I see, well you know, actually I can understand it, I can understand where they are coming from. Why
they are doing it? People, in the case of the kids. You would do anything for your kids, to get your kid in a better class? Absolutely! I can understand that. Like lots of economic stuff. Like I did a story about animal smuggling for *National Geographic*. That wasn’t in China. But there’s also parts you could apply the same things of China. I remember talking about, cause I was thinking about how you know like, I know, right, endangered species, and people are. It’s horrible they kill the rhinos. They kill them and get their fur. Or kill a shark to get the fin, all the stuff like that. And the reason people do this is, you know, Americans all think, yeah men are just doing it because they wanna, they have the, it’s like Viagra, men want them for Viagra. They kill these animal and they have a perpetual erection, that’s what they want. But a lot of the people I talked to about it, they want it because their aunt got cancer and so they want to make her feel better when she’s going through chemo or whatever. I was like of course I would do exactly the same thing absolutely. I hate to say this because I’m photographing this stuff to kinda of for anti-animal-poaching. I’m not for animal-poaching. However, I could see where they are coming from you know. I can see how people like this is I can get my family out of poverty, I’m gonna do this. I can see why people… You know, it’s funny like we are talking about the people who do these (telemarketing) phone calls right? That’s their job. I hate… I had a job like that. I was a telemarketer once. I think the person that makes me so angry is that they call me and I told them I don’t want the thing. They kept calling me. It was just incredibly inefficient. I’m like I’m not even on your list. Why am I on your list? Take me off your list! You are wasting your time and my time. If I actually want what they are selling, then that makes sense. So I guess this is at times, I get where they are coming from, I think the thing is to be in a free country, to be in the a different
situation, that’s the exercise I have to go through to see, okay, will I do the same thing if I were in that situation. And I think it more often yes than not. Even if that’s something kind of like something I don’t really like you know.

ZOU: So I’d like to ask you about your first trip. What brought you here the first time on the scholarship? Why did you come here?

LEONG: To find out about my family. To go back to see my family. Who I could’ve been? Going back to see my family, my village in Guangdong. And …

ZOU: That was for yourself?

LEONG: It was for myself. My family didn’t. I was the first one to come back here. My dad never came back. He came back after… he came back here to visit me. But he never came back before. My sister never came back. My aunts never came… At that point, I was the only one in I think two generations to have been back to China. Maybe a couple aunts and uncles. But mostly, I certainly spent most time here. They are all you know, they live in Chicago; they live in Las Vegas now. That’s part of the thing, not thinking about China that much. So no, that was purely me. That was the reason I came back for my own interest. And I guess, yeah, I came back here and the person to find out my Chinese after a while because this is a crazy interesting place with all these stuff happening, happening fast. You don’t see it like this again you know. And it’s happening. It’s on a crazy. It’s almost like not just the little village that’s happening. The billion-person country that’s all changing at the same time. You know. All these places, you know. There are places. I went all over China. All provinces. 70 major cities. Every province. But I haven’t been to them recently right you know. So like I don’t know, like
Xiamen, or somewhere like that. I haven’t been there for a long time. I bet it’s so
different now.

ZOU: That sounds quite interesting because now you are in China. But yeah, what, I
don’t know, you probably have thought about this. What if you were born here? You said
you would have a totally different life?

LEONG: My cousin. My cousin never left the farm. And he …

ZOU: He lives here?

LEONG: No yeah. He lives. My cousin, a distant cousin. He lives in a Foshan you know,
there’s lots of overseas Chinese? And he, he was on the farm. He was younger than me. I
met him when I first came into China. He was on the farm. He injured his back at some
point, and then he died, never leaving the farm. That was him. That was his whole life,
you know, being the country boy. He died like a couple years ago. And then all I have my
other cousins in Shunde. And they are like you know businessmen working for wine
companies. It’s all these possibilities. But back then, it was different. Nobody left the
village back then. But now people grew up and they change. You think to be part of, part
of being here all this time helps you think, helps show you that when you think of a
foreign country, a foreign state like China, you think of it as a static place right? Like it
doesn’t change right? Like America is… They still think like Tiananmen Square and
Olympics right? That’s what you got with Americans in their head, the Tiananmen
Square. Here, you know, it’s a moving; it’s always changing. Yes, back then, my cousins
in the village. But now you know, not talking about the guy who died, but once he leaves,
they change too. You know, people like you; you change too. You are different from your
parents for sure right? Are your parents city people or the country people?
ZOU: My parents lived in the countryside. They just migrated to the city. So that was the big. I see what you are saying. It’s totally different.

LEONG: Yeah, it’s not a static target. It’s a moving, growing, dynamic thing. And that’s what traveling around this country and looking at things and you see how things change has taught me a lot. You know it’s like when you think about your friends right? You see they are a little different. You got to. You should expect that because they are changing too. You are changing. Things are going on outside your vision.

ZOU: So before you came to China, did you expect, have certain expectation what China was?

LEONG: Of course. I expected there’s a lack of knowledge. Nobody knows much about China at all. I didn’t know. I didn’t know what kind of music people listen to. I didn’t know. Certain things did meet expectation. The fact that people were wearing the same color of clothes. That was exactly what I expected. You know. But I was surprised people tell me like... I remember talking to people about things. Just like cameras. Coming to China, and like you talk about something. I would be like kind of oh I got this thing and people, you can’t possibly understand this I have this camera because… and people would tell me like, you know, yeah, we actually don’t, we can’t afford it, but we know all about them because we read about it, we know about it. The economy hadn’t changed yet, so you couldn’t just buy Nikon cameras in those days. I was amazed how much people knew about stuff, like about cars that they couldn’t even drive. No one even owned a car. But people had these magazines. And they read about stuff and they know about things that they couldn’t actually experience. It’s kinda weird there’s a virtual wall for a lot of Chinese back in the day right pre 89, 92. People all kinda had this, they saw
stuff. And then this boom exploded in 2000. The Internet also has become this stuff, people had all dreamt of happening becoming reality. Right now, people, you could own a car, you could own a really nice car. That’s pretty, pretty... But all along, I have been thinking oh these people have no idea. You know what I’m saying? Oh, these people you know. I’m bringing all this new stuff and they have no idea. But no actually people say no we know. I remember a friend very specifically saying, listen, it’s not that we don’t know about the stuff. It’s just that we, we don’t own it, but we know all about it.

ZOU: That was surprising?

LEONG: That surprised me. I was like of course. It made a lot of sense. All the time, I was being foolish. I was like, kind like, you know, I was saying, being very condescending before.

ZOU: So you’ve been here for like 20 something years? What surprised the most? Or something you never thought that would happen? Or the direction China (has taken)?

LEONG: I think I told you, in 89, after 89, I thought nothing is gonna happen. You are stuck here. They had a chance and they blew it you know.

ZOU: You mean after the 6/4, you know nothing would change (from then)?

LEONG: Yeah, that was the opportunity. Because they closed down.

ZOU: Is it kinda like North Korea right now?

LEONG: Yeah. But actually you know obviously not. Look how things are.

ZOU: I was told that you know there’s a large wave of journalists coming in around 2007.

LEONG: I don’t know that really.

ZOU: Well, because…
LEONG: Oh, pre-Olympics.

ZOU: Right. I met a lot of journalists who came around that time. I got the impression, they were saying they feel this optimism rising before the Olympics. I don’t know if that’s their personal feeling or that was how it was in China. And after, they were saying after a few years like right now, they don’t feel that optimism in China anymore. I don’t know. I’m really curious to know what you think. For you know, you’ve been here for so long, was that something that you experienced? The optimism really raised around pre-Olympics and now it’s going away?

LEONG: I don’t know. Right before Olympics, there was the whole Tibet, you know, it never… I guess I’ve been here long enough and I’ve seen the ups and downs longer than most people have. So you know, it seems opening and we can do all these things. This is like a simple thing. In the 90’s, like suddenly everybody was watching satellite TV right. And that’s like a very open thing. Oh yeah, everybody is gonna be open. It’s gonna be.

Watching the satellite TV on today. I mean, you get an influx with foreign media and then one day, bang. (Bang on the table.) Take those, take down those satellites. It was over. And I’ve seen them come back up. But that was the thing. Before you could buy the satellite box at the department store, showing you like you know Hong Kong TV. All these wider stuff. And so yeah, that was because it’s opening up and then boom it shut down. Or churches. I remember like in mid-2000, like churches all were like you know, all these so-called home churches cause they were basically underground churches were opening up and doing their thing, and then suddenly boom, they put those things down and they are being shut down, they are all questioned by the police. So there’s this flow. You think oh things are gonna change. Everybody is gonna do what they wanna do. And
then boom it comes back down. I mean it’s just like the Olympics. You thought, the
Olympics are coming and man, during the Olympics the air got much better here. Wow.
It’s gonna be wonderful here from now on. Then like, look at today, you know you get
this 200, 300, 500 days NPI day you know. So yeah, it comes and goes. It was one thing I
always think that I feel this that my ability. Is it truly getting better here? It feels like they
are getting better here right? Overall it’s getting better. Partially it is you know, people
like their stuff. People, I have met your generation. I met people from colleges with
various stories; these people are bringing it together. I don’t think these people are
screwing up. These people can’t screw up the country. These people are gonna do good.
A lot of the young, smart, you know, and you know, good people. And I just think, these
are the people I meet, if they are representative of how this country is gonna be, then it’s
great. The country is gonna be in good shape. And I thought, it could be… So I always
think things are getting better and better right however slightly? And the problem is that
I’ve been here so long that my tolerance for small things that still suck. Like our water, I
really miss the water, we have all these water to keep, we brought these faucets so we can
actually use the water. And then we were told the water is not even been like clean before
coming into our system. So it’s still got viruses and all the stuff in it. So it’s like, I was
positive but the... Like somebody screwed up somewhere, somebody is just not looking
out for everybody. So it is getting better. But my tolerance is wearing thinner. Does that
make sense? These things my tolerance, my tolerance is eroding. So that’s kind of like
what you get after 20 years as an American living in China.
ZOU: So I’m sure you go back to United States once a year right?
LEONG: Right, once, once or twice a year.
ZOU: So what kept you coming back? Because it was interesting?

LEONG: Because this is my job, my base. I get work. I do. People know I’m here. They want a photo or portrait, or they have an idea, they want you to, not just in China, but all over Asia. Then I can. People know I’m here. So.

ZOU: But you said you do plan to move back?

LEONG: Yeah yeah yeah. But it’s hard right now. Cause our jobs are here. I mean it is still interesting. Yeah, if I go back to America, I would probably be bored out of my mind.

ZOU: So if you go back to United States, what would you do?

LEONG: Good question. I have clients I can work for. I could travel back here. I will probably travel back here.

ZOU: I’ve interviewed journalists. They were saying they don’t know what they would do. If they go back, life is so difference here. You kinda have your life here. When you go back, you have to start something new.

LEONG: Yeah yeah. And I’ve been here longer than almost anybody right? There’s a couple guys who are still here. I’ve been here so long that it would be hard to switch. It’s not like my skills are not transferrable. I could be a photographer. But also the fact like I’m. Here, coming here as a young photographer, this is something you probably already heard. 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. It was this small. And now obviously it’s spread out. Still it’s a small world. It’s much more varied than it was... So that’s what partially how I got into this business. Because I had the skills, I could use them as a journalist, I was able to make money and that’s partially... There was like five photographers who do good shooting internationally. We’d all send our pictures to (AP)... Cause the AP had the machine that you can send the pictures digitally. AP, or Agency AFP. The two places you can go to. You know all these, you know, I developed my film in the bathroom with all these film. Developing it in the bathroom with chemicals I mixed myself you know. And I’ve taken the picture, chose two pictures that I wanted to send to New York, gave it to the guy in AP and he could do some, computer, I don’t know what it was, it was some weird machine, and scan it and send it to America. So yeah, now I’m kinda curious to see, I don’t know how young photographers work here. But it’s still a big story. Back then, it was not like not open to everybody. You had to be able to speak Chinese to get around, in addition to photography skills, you could, I guess that’s how they get in. I wouldn’t actually recommend it for anybody.

ZOU: Why not?

LEONG: The photojournalism I think is kind of like dying. Yeah.

ZOU: Why so? Why would you say that?
LEONG: Cause I know these magazines I used to all work for don’t exist any more, like *Newsweek* right? *Time* is a very thin magazine right now. It used to be a big fat magazine. Now what people really do are all business magazines. And they seem to be fading as well.

ZOU: Do you have any regret?

LEONG: About what?

ZOU: Anything.

LEONG: I always think I could work harder than I do because… I was here in this historical time. I think I could’ve done more. There’s stuff that was happening I could’ve done more. There’s all these… I mean, yeah, I was, the stories to be said, to be told, the stuff I didn’t get to. All photographers have regrets of photos they didn’t take. There’s millions of them. There’s millions of photos you didn’t take as a photographer. Oh, I didn’t take my camera. Or I didn’t, you know, only something I’m interested. I should be interested. Why didn’t I shoot that? It was so amazing and I didn’t shoot it. That’s just not about China.

ZOU: So what do you think of the photography about China in the foreign press in general? I mean I’m sure you see a lot of them.

LEONG: I guess so. It’s gotten certainly better. Back in the day, there weren’t that many people. Of course it’s gotten better. Photographers, it’s easier because of the digital. It’s more convenient at least. There’s more photographers, Chinese photographers. Because everyone, back in the day, they all knew about Nikon but nobody had one. Now everybody’s got the same camera as I do. And I think people have a better idea of. Yeah, even we say there aren’t many, there aren’t a lot great media in China in terms of news
and documentary, that’s something that’s kinda weak. But there is some and there’s some good ones. And there are people who are good at it you know in a way that wasn’t before.

ZOU: How have you changed after 20 years?

LEONG: In terms of photography, the biggest way I’ve changed is, when I first got here, it was all new and fresh right? This is why photographers travel; you always gonna see something new and fresh and different. When I first got here, I shot everything. I shot people, shot anyone aside the street fixing something, I would photograph that cause it is all to me different and strange and I want a picture of it. Now I’m jaded, I’ve been here so many years; I’ve been here so long. Oh I see that all the time, I can get that again, I will see that again. That’s part of some regrets. Some people are the kind of people who are shooting every single thing in every part of their life. They are documenting everything. And there are some people who are just like I have to get into the mode. I kinda got to force myself to get out there and do it. And so, and… I don’t regret this. I mean partially that’s just how I’ve changed. I’m not so jazzed about the stuff I see anymore because I’ve seen it. And that’s why I told you I don’t shoot so much journalism in China anymore. I’ve been doing in India and Africa most recently or documenting projects in these places because it’s something different. It keeps me a little bit… jazzed you know?

ZOU: Is there like a repeating cycle in China?

LEONG: Talk about journalism, that’s what you see. You see the same story. You don’t see the same one story. You see one wave, the 2007 wave of journalists come over. And four years later you know, another grand comes over. Then another. They kinda do the same story again and again or variations of the same stories again and again you know?
I’d be interested to see how they changed, to find some topic and see how the approaches changed at all. The migrant story, I mean, how many times you hear the migrant stories right? There’s all these migrant stories. There’s a lot of good ones too. It’s not like. The topic is an old recycled topic. But how the approaches are all different.

ZOU: But you see the same story coming out all the time?

LEONG: All the time. Yeah. Of course.

ZOU: But you do get some surprised?

LEONG: Yeah, yeah. Exactly.

LEONG: I gotta go.

**Interview with Matt Forney**

Date recorded: September 20

Introduction: Matthew Forney was Beijing bureau chief of *Time* magazine from 2000 to 2006. He was laid off during *Time*’s downsizing in 2006. He founded Fathom China, a company that offers custom-designed reports addressing China’s litigation history, labor relations, management retention, executive biographies, political risk and other client concerns. Arriving in China in 1993, Forney is fluent in Chinese and has more than a decade of experience investigating Chinese companies and their executives. Forney also served for three years as Beijing correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* and for three years as Bureau Chief of *the Far Eastern Economic Review*. Forney is now 48.

ZOU: So you came here in 1993, so can you tell me what brought you there?

FORNEY: Well, I’ve been working… well, how far back you want to go? I had studied Chinese in Feberin College in Ohio. So I learned Chinese and my Chinese was, you know, pretty good. It was ok. At that time, this was 19…, so I guess I started studying in
1997, so very few foreigners spoke Chinese. And then after I graduated, I needed to make a decision on what kind of job I was gonna do. And I decided that I wanted to be a journalist. I had no experience. I had never worked in journalism before. And I went to Taiwan because I knew somebody in Taiwan. And I managed to get a job in radio, at a radio station in Taiwan. And I can walk you through that if you are interested in that. It’s kind of beyond... If you want that level of detail, I’m happy to give it to you. Then I managed to parley into a job in Beijing in UPI, the press international. So very, very basic level right. But that’s what brought me in Beijing in 1993.

ZOU: So why did you studied Chinese in college? Is that your major?
FORNEY: Why did I? I was interested in Chinese politics. People my age, right, it’s my Benmingnian. So I’m 48. People my age usually did not study Chinese because it was a good career move because there was nothing really happening in China in 1998 that you could have a career doing right? The people who wanted to be in business were studying Japanese or Korean if they were interested in learning Asian languages. So the people who learned Chinese and people tend to be, who like Chinese literature or philosophy or Buddhism and religion or politics, a lot of leftist politics. A lot of people who sort of studied Mao, Mao Zedong right? So I guess I was sort of in that category.

ZOU: Where did you? Where? How did you get that influence?
FORNEY: When I was in high school, I read *Red Star Over China* by Edward Snow. You know that book?


FORNEY: He was from Missouri also. Right. Yeah. So I read that book and it had a big impact on me. I thought it was the kind of epic struggles of the Guomindang and. It was
just fascinating. I wanted to know more about it. I wanted to cover China. I wanted to sort of see how China worked. And before I came, I wanted to learn Chinese. So that was why.

ZOU: And you didn’t expect China to be this superpower and the story of the, back then right? You didn’t expect that, did you?

FORNEY: No. Of course not. I just was looking for excuses to come to China. We were all young. How old are you?

ZOU: 25.

FORNEY: Ok. Well, I was a little bit younger than you are. And I had the opportunity to learn this language and go to China. I wanted to travel around the world. I wanted to see things that my parents didn’t see. And I wanted to spent time overseas. I knew I wanted to do that. And then where to go? You know once I had an interest in China, then that interest developed.

ZOU: Where you grew up?

FORNEY: Philadelphia. What about you? Where did you grow up?

ZOU: Chengdu.

FORNEY: I love Chengdu.

ZOU: You do?

FORNEY: I haven’t been there for about a year.

ZOU: Yeah, it’s a city I think that appeals to a lot of people for sure.

FORNEY: I’m thinking of going back. I’ve got you know like … Guoqingjie²’s coming up right? I don’t really have any plans. So and my family is overseas. So I can travel

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² China’s fourth of July, the Independence Day, a holiday with a week off nationwide
anywhere I want to go. This is something… You know I don’t work as a journalist anymore. I don’t really miss it that much because what I do now still feels like journalism. But what I miss is traveling around China. I miss going to strange places you know like in the countryside. You know, Chengdu, I haven’t been to Chengdu probably in five or six years. And I’m looking forward to going back. So Guoqingjie, my family is overseas and I’m, trying to decide where to go.

ZOU: Yeah, Chengdu has changed a lot.
FORNEY: I think I might go to Chengdu. But I’d rather go to countryside. I’m thinking maybe Chongqing. I haven’t been to Chongqing for a really long time. And then Yangzi, Wanxian those areas.

ZOU: That would be a good plan. I know you started Fathom China. Is that what your job is, your main focus is?
FORNEY: Yeah.

ZOU: So you no longer work as a journalist? Why did you leave? I mean you didn’t leave journalism per se. But I mean, why did you stop working as a professional journalist?
FORNEY: It was because what happened in the industry.

ZOU: What happened?
FORNEY: Well, journalism collapsed in around 2008. And I was at the Time, the bureau chief of Time magazine. In one night, Time fired all its bureau chiefs. They gave us a bit of money but they pushed us out of door in their costs saving effort. I didn’t leave the job. And I guess I could’ve gone out and try to find another journalism job. But you know bureau chief of Time magazine is pretty high. And it’s kind of, it’s a good, it’s a good...
had an inspiration and I had accomplished that. So rather than fighting my way back into journalism at a lower level, I decided to do something else. And also I guess I was over 40. It is a little bit a young person’s profession. So I felt like. Well, you know if journalism stayed healthy, I definitely would stay in journalism. But it was so unstable, even if I have managed to get another job in journalism. There was no reason to think that job would, would last more than a few years. And in fact, since then, many journalists that I know have lost their jobs. It was the combination of the Internet taking away advertising money and the financial crisis of 2008 taking away advertising money. And all of a sudden, journalist has contracted right? I mean if you think about it, in China, I worked for five news organizations. And three of them no longer exist. So you know, you could see that’s a good measure of what’s happening in the industry.

ZOU: Right. Another question I have for you. That’s not about journalism. Why you stayed in China for so long till now?

FORNEY: You know, for most of the time that I was here, I stayed because … There’s two answers for that. One is because I like it here. To be a journalist in China in the 1990’s and the early 2000, I think was a privilege. I got to write about the most important story in the world every week right? And it was changing fast. And it was changing for the positive right? I talked to colleagues who spent ten years covering Middle East. And at the end of those ten years, they felt nothing had changed at all. Whereas in China, ten yeas go by, you feel like you are in a different country and generally for the better. So it was very... So that’s very enticing for a journalist. I don’t know why everybody doesn’t want to be a journalist in China. So one of the reasons that I stayed here is because it was very professionally (satisfying). I had professional success. And I found it very satisfying.
right. And the other reason is because while I was raising a family here. My wife is Italian. We met here in China. She speaks Chinese and our kids were born here. We kinda have a stable life here, so it was the combination of professional success and with the comfort. No, comfort is not the right word. Because my wife and I met here, we have this shared interest and experience in China that we would’ve really had if we went to America right? Does that make sense? Because we met here, and she speaks Chinese and we built a life here. So I’m kinda. It’s just that simple. Our life is here. If we went somewhere else, we would have to create a new life together, which we didn’t want to do because we have a pretty good life here.

ZOU: So you probably wouldn’t want to go back to the United States in the near future?

FORNEY: No. Actually now we are transitioning out. My son is in college, so he’s out already.

ZOU: Your son’s in United States?

FORNEY: Canada. He goes to Migili University is Montreal. And my daughter… We decided to relocate back to Italy for a year or so. We have been here for 21 years. So it wasn’t a snap decision. But we wanted our daughter to finish high school in Italy. My, my wife and daughter now live in Italy. And I split half my time here and half my time there.

ZOU: Why you guys want to leave now?

FORNEY: Those were entirely personal reasons. (Things off the record for personal reasons.) When you raise kids in China as a foreigner right, most of their friends. They go to, you make friends in school. We sent our daughter to a French school, an international school. So most of her friends were French. If there were Chinese, they were Chinese
who had a French passport right? So as she got, she grew up here, she was born here. As she got older, usually when you get older, the number of people who can be your friends gets bigger right? Because your social circle get bigger and you do more things. But it’s very interesting as an expat kid who grew up in a place like China, if you want to be friends with other people in your school who have similar experiences, who speak Chinese, who kinda understand China. They didn’t just arrive right. There is a number of people who are your potential friends gets smaller and smaller every year because kids leave. Their parents leave and the kids leave. So basically our daughter’s social circle was kinda getting sort of small. It sounds funny. A city of 20 million people and social circle getting smaller. We just thought it would be healthier in Italy. It’s easier for her to meet people. It was just kind of. We decided that she should stay there. So we had to make that. My wife stays there. I have a business that’s quite portable. I can do it here. I can do it from there. So I do it half here and half there. Isn’t that interesting?

ZOU: Yeah it is. I do see why that happens. Because what I heard, a lot of foreigners, they leave China because you know when they want to raise their kids either in Canada or United States. They don’t want to raise their kids in China because of the pollution and everything. So I was curious why you decided to you know raise your kids in China instead of moving back to America or even Italy?

FORNEY: Yeah, we just. I don’t know. We didn’t. If I had fall in love with and married an American woman, maybe we would’ve gone back to America or if she had married an Italian, maybe she would’ve gone back to Italy. But as it was, me being an American and her being Italian, you know, I don’t really. There’s really not much to do for me in Italy. Right? I don’t speak Italian very well. The job opportunity. The Italian economy is
terrible. There was really nothing for me to do in Italy. And there was not much for her to
do in America. And she wouldn’t know. She’s not a professional. She runs a furniture
business right? She has a shop in her town in Italy. And she sells Chinese furniture. But
she’s not a layer. She’s not a doctor. She doesn’t do the kind of work where you can just
go somewhere because of your professional skills you can get a job. So because there was
nothing really in Italy for me and there’s nothing really in America for her. We just
stayed here and we are perfectly happy to do it.
ZOU: You said in general you think the direction China is taking. China has gotten better
right? I’ve also heard journalists telling me. I guess maybe, many journalists I met arrived
in China around 2007. So they felt they had the impression that China was this, there was
this optimism in the air. Pre-Olympics. You know, that era and now they felt that
optimism has gone in China. Do you? Is that accurate? Is that something you experienced
or that was maybe just their personal experience that doesn’t really reflect the bigger
picture of what China has really become? Does that make sense?
FORNEY: That’s an interesting question. I’m not really sure how to measure optimism. I
agree with them that China is an optimistic place and the period in the run-up to the
Olympics in 2007 was particularly optimistic right? Were you here then? You probably
were here right?
ZOU: Yeah, I was in college.
FORNEY: That was really. As you know. I think in general Chinese people they… they
care how the world looks at them right? And the Olympics were very important for that
reason. This was sort of their … (couldn’t hear due to bad connection) big back to the
world stage since the economic reforms began. Unless you count 1989 right? So this was
sort of the big, really the biggest event in China since, since, since 1989 or since 1978 right? So it was exceedingly optimistic. And that optimism had a specific target, which was the Olympics. I’m not really sure how to measure optimism any more. But I don’t think China is any less optimistic in terms of like job prospects right? I mean, the economy is a bit slower now than it was. The housing prices are falling a little bit. But I think these things are, these are short-term measures right? Housing prices. I think when you look at the longer-term measures and how you would find optimism I mean. To me it mostly comes down to economic optimism. People feel like their lives are getting better and will continue to get better. Their kids will have better lives than they had. They are taking holidays and they are buying the consumer items they want. You know, that didn’t happen 20 years ago. And I think the expectation is still that it’s gonna be better. I don’t think people your age are thinking I have it better than my children will right? My kids are gonna have a harder time than I did. I don’t think people your age are thinking that way. And I think you would assume that your kids will have more opportunities right? I think so.

ZOU: So when you worked as a journalist for the *Time*, how did you see your role as a journalist?

FORNEY: How did I see my role? Ok. I’m gonna answer that totally honest. So be careful how you use this stuff ok? Don’t make me look bad. I thought my role was to tell interesting stories. And that was about it. I’m not sure how other people have answered that question. But mostly I just wanted to tell interesting stories about China. I wanted to write about ordinary Chinese people as much as I could instead of famous Chinese people. I wanted to write about people, not about, not about geopolitics. I wasn’t really
interested in writing about Sino-US relations, and China’s military, wasn’t really interested in that stuff. I wrote it because it was my job and I had to write stories like that. But I was much, much more interested in writing about things from the ground level right, which is not always easy to do at *Time* magazine. So I thought my role… To tell you the truth, Dandan, I didn’t really think I’m *Time* magazine’s bureau chief. That’s an important role. And so this year I’m gonna need to write you know like you know, there are certain things that people need to know about China. And so I’m gonna go out. I’m gonna write those things. I guess I did feel that way. Hang on. Let me think about this. I guess I thought of it… you know… I was really interested in what was going on in China. So something that was interesting to me would be interesting others. So I was basically trying to keep myself entertained and writing things I found interesting. That was really my approach to the job. I didn’t really think about who was reading my stories. I didn’t, I wasn’t writing for people in Washington, you know, who make policy. I wasn’t even particularly writing with any readers in mind. I just wrote what I thought was interesting. Does that make sense? Does anybody say that when you asked them this question?

ZOU: It’s funny because that’s the answer I was expecting to get from journalists. But you are first person who told me that.

FORNEY: Well, that’s interesting. I told you that I would answer honestly. Because I wanted… My goal in becoming a journalist was to explore China right? I started studying Chinese in college. This was always what I wanted to do was to have an excuse to run around China and talk to Chinese people and write about it cause I liked leaning about China and I liked writing. Those are the two things that I like to do. So to put it together into a job where I could run all around China and write about it just made me happy
right? And I didn’t really care who I did it for. The fact that I’m doing it for *Time* magazine was fine because it was a prestigious and the job that I liked the most is working at the *Far East Economic Review*. Because they really let me write whatever I wanted. You know. *Time* magazine was a little bit editor-heavy you know. Like there were more people writing for the magazine than the space in the magazine. So you kinda have to compete for stories. There are things they probably don’t teach you in journalism school. It’s better to work for publications that have few editors and a lot of space to fill. Because they will just take anything right? If you write, they will take it. If you work for publications that you know every article they get is like a manuscript. Six different people are gonna edit it and make you think about it. That’s just less. *Time* magazine was kinda that way.

ZOU: So right now are you done exploring China? You are leaving right?

FORNEY: Yeah. I’m spending a lot of time out of China. No, I haven’t told you about my work now. My work now I find still really interesting. So I feel like I’m exploring China but from a different perspective. Much more looking into the business world, which is exceedingly important for China right? The business and economics in China. So I’m focused on that. I don’t get to travel as much. When I travel, I go to Shanghai; I go to Hong Kong; I go to Shenzhen. And I don’t go to Chengdu or Wanxian anymore, very rarely. I miss that personally right? I don’t really miss it professionally. I still like traveling around China. I still do travel around China. You know, for Guoqingjie. I told you I’m thinking where I’m gonna go because I really like that. What did you ask me?

ZOU: You kinda answered that question. So that’s fine. So my next question. I wonder how have you changed if any after working in China? I mean how has that experience
affected what you think of yourself and the world? I know that’s a really broad question. It’s probably hard to answer.

FORNEY: Yeah, it is a broad question. But I think I can answer it in two ways right? One is having spending a life in journalism and writing for a living. Separate from China, it’s just writing. Because one of the things I learned how to do as a journalist was to write fairly well right? Like I’m satisfied that I can express myself as I want to be able to express myself. And most people can’t do that because they haven’t been trained right? And I find that really, really satisfying. And one of the reasons I think is because, because of my journalism experience and because I tend to see things in stories. And because I like to write. I tend to see my own life sort of as a story right? So when I’m in a situation because of my journalism background, I’m kinda of, I’m thinking how can I write this you know? Like I’m involved in a conversation with people in subway, what’s interesting about this conversation? What would I write about in order to make it compelling to somebody who was not here now? And experience that I had, writing stories and learning how to use the English language to my advantage, I find very satisfying. Right. So that’s one of the things that I kind gotten out of journalism. That maybe other people have told you. I don’t know if they feel that way. But I certainly feel that way. And as for China. And then there’s the issue of doing journalism in China right? I don’t think doing journalism in China has changed. I think what I just explained to you I think that would happen wherever else I was a journalist right? And then there’s living in China for 20 years. And how has that changed my attitude you know toward things? That’s a harder one. That’s much harder. I think it’s made me I think I learn to appreciate the aspects of the Chinese culture that are missing in my own culture. Like the fives of family. that my
family. My parents are divorced. My family is kinda scattered all over the place. That you know, I know so many Chinese about your age 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 sacrifice for 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. Does that make sense?

ZOU: Yeah absolutely.

FORNEY: I was talking with somebody yesterday who was talking about... He has become conservative because you know China doesn’t have a very good welfare system. And that might be one of the reasons Chinese work so hard. Chinese work really hard right? And families stay together because there’s no safe net. If you do… simply in the United States or Europe, people, the society functions better because as in China, people stay closed and people take care of each other... (Could not hear due to bad connection)

ZOU: Right. I was told by not just journalists, not just journalists, but foreigners. They feel like an outsider. I wonder if you feel that way. Does that bother you?

FORNEY: I absolutely feel that. That doesn’t bother me. When I go back to America, I feel like I’m in disguise. I feel other people treat me like I’m one of them. But I don’t feel like I’m one of them any more because I’ve spent so much time overseas right? That I tend to see America. And I’ve been overseas for more than half of my life now. So I tend
to look at America as a foreign country right? I have stronger feeling for the place than I do for other countries. But I tend to take the same sort of analytical. I’m always asking why is this, why is it in America you know we want more of something that have a lower quality you know? Why do we want more food that doesn’t taste good? Instead of less food that’s good? That kind of thing. So yeah, I do feel like when I’m in America, I’m not… I’m observing it from the outside. I definitely feel that way. It’s easier. But it’s easier than observing China from the outside because everyone speaks English and nobody has a dialect. And I understand what everybody’s is saying. When I was in New York last time, I bought sunglasses because I could not resist the temptation to star at people all the time. Because they are just so interesting looking. So I actually bought sunglasses so I can look at people and they wouldn’t know I was looking at them. That’s how much I feel like I want to observe what’s happening. Much more closely than I would have. Now I have been here for so long. I tend no to look at Chinese people as being all just the same. The difference in different provinces is like, you know, huge differences. And then class background, you know, the difference between, you know, even just Beijing and Shanghai. I like going to Shanghai. I’m going to Shanghai tomorrow. Can’t wait to get there. Because Shanghai just has a complete different feel than Beijing.

ZOU: So can you tell me one thing that you learned about yourself after, you know, working as a journalist and also living in China for more than 20 years?

FORNEY: Something I learned about myself? I’m not sure I can answer that question very easily. I think being in China, I think being in China has made me much more patient, right? That it’s given me the idea that you could usually, you could usually figure
out a way to get done what you want to get done. There’s usually a way. You just have to be kinda flexible and patient. And that doesn’t always work well outside of China. I mean, can I give you an example?

ZOU: Sure. Please.

FORNEY: So I was traveling with my family a couple years ago. We were at monument valley, you know monument valley in Arizona? Very beautiful. And my wife had flu she was running fever. She was not,, She wanted to see a doctor. So we went to a doctor’s office on a ravoho Indian reservation. And we got there probably 6 o’clock. And we went to the, you know the guahao, Guahao window. And the woman at the desk said the doctor is seeing a patient now and it’s his last patient. And I don’t think he’s gonna have time to see your wife you know. And you know my wife was sitting there. She had a blanket around her. She was obviously not feeling well. And this is the only doctor’s office for 200 miles. So I just kinda… And she said you can wait if you want to, but I don’t think he’s gonna see you. And so because of my China experience, I said ok we will wait you know. So we sat down. I figured if we sat down right in front of her, she couldn’t come back and say the doctor left and he’s not gonna see you. So she came back and said the doctor won’t see you. You can come back tomorrow morning. And I was kind of shocked. That would never have had happened in China right. In China, if you sit there for long enough. Maybe we sat there for an hour, it wasn’t ten minutes. We waited for a long time before she came back and said the doctor left. And so that was our effort to use what we learned in China in American context and it didn’t work. So I guess that was… I was trying to apply this lesson I learned from living in China. You know, if you are patient and if you, if you are willing to wait and if you are willing to kinda change your approach
to things, you can usually get what you want. China is like a can-do place, don’t you think? You can kind of accomplish what you want to accomplish. Yeah. It’s… And that’s completely different from when I came here. When I came here, China was like, it was the meiyou place. Everything was, everything was meiyou. And that was, that was for two reasons. One because it didn’t actually have consumer goods, you know. They didn’t have stuff. They didn’t have glasses. And they didn’t have like a notebook or just like basic shit you wanted. They didn’t have. And also nobody wanted to do anything because there was no private economy. And so nobody was willing to help anything. It was really awful. China used to be an awful place when I first got here. Did you parents talk to you about it?

ZOU: Of course. Yeah. I actually talked to Mark about this. We were talking about the place where my, where I live, my parents’ apartment complex was. It used to be a farm, you know you grew cabbages out of it. And it’s completely different now. I get what you are saying. I understand how difficult it was for my parents, even for me when I was a kid. So I do remember those time, and it’s amazing China has changed I guess.

FORNEY: It’s so amazing. So I was a journalist for all of that happened. Writing all those stories.

ZOU: I know the condition was bad. But your motivation to write about stories made you stay right? Is that an accurate description?

FORNEY: Yeah, I think so. I think I just so enjoyed writing stories about China. That’s what kept me here. I wasn’t necessarily here because you know… But then I came here because it was challenging right? I mean, anybody who was like me who studied Chinese in 1980’s was looking for a challenge. We definitely did not come here because it was
easy right? And now like I see young people like your age, but foreigners who come to Beijing and don’t speak Chinese, and teach English or get a job. They do it because it is easy. It’s easier to come here and work a while than does that in England or Australia. You know what I mean? The places where people used to go. Right. I’m gonna take a year and I’m gonna go to Japan. I went to Taiwan. When I was in college, you know, you take a year and you go somewhere for two years and then you go back home, you go to graduate school. People come to China and do that now because it’s so easy. That’s kind of amazing to me because nobody came to China in 1992 because it was easy. You came because you are looking for a challenge.

ZOU: So what’s your biggest frustration I mean in China?

FORNEY: Frustration?

ZOU: Right, biggest frustration. Actually that’s two questions. The first one is frustration working as a journalist. And the second one is frustration living in China. That’s probably two different questions.

FORNEY: Ok. I mean the biggest, the biggest problem with working as a journalist in China. There were two problems. One was dealing with the Chinese government. And another one is dealing with editors.

ZOU: Editors who are based in New York?

FORNEY: Yeah. Time magazine. I guess I’m talking specifically about Time magazine. Time magazine. I just had a fundamental disagreement with some editors there about whom we should be writing about in China. And I never had that with any of my other publications because there are so many different ones. So one of the frustrations is dealing with editors. I actually never really found... I wouldn’t describe that Chinese
government as being frustrating to work with. It was more… because I could write stories that I wanted to write whether the Chinese government liked it or not. It wasn’t an issue. There was more. I was just worried about the people that I wrote about or talked to were gonna get in trouble. But I wouldn’t describe that as a frustration. It’s not a frustration. That’s more just what it is to be a journalist in China.

ZOU: So you said that another, you know, one thing is about working with the editors at the *Time* magazine. And you disagreed with what editors want to, what they want you to write about? So are you saying, I don’t know, I mean, I don’t know if you want to talk about that? Is it because, is there, the editors, they have a certain topic that they want you to write about? What do you mean those disagreements?

FORNEY: No. It was more like a business. Actually it was a very specific issue. *Time* magazine had been banned in China because of our coverage of Falungong right? So it was banned. You couldn’t buy the magazine in China, which isn’t really a problem because it was only available I mean most Chinese people can’t buy *Time* magazine anyway right? It was only available in five-star hotels to foreigners right? It wasn’t like, you living in Chengdu couldn’t just subscribe to *Time* magazine and have it mailed to you at home everyday. The government won’t allow that. There’s the censorship right? So the *Time* magazine being banned in China didn’t cost *Time* magazine any money right? But it’s not just *Time* magazine; it’s Time Inc. right? And Time Inc. has about 100 different magazines. *Time* magazine is a news magazine, and it’s kinda political. But they also have these that are not political, like wallpaper and home decoration magazines and all these other magazines right, which they could sell in China right in Chinese editions, *Sports Illustrated* right? I mean what you wanted to sell those magazines in China, but
they couldn’t do it as long as *Time* magazine was banned. So in order to lift the ban on *Time* magazine, I came under a lot of pressure to write really positive stories about China right, which I wouldn’t do. They, at one point, they did a cover story on Shanghai. And they specifically said that it can only be positive. And they got somebody else to write it. So that was bad for my relationship with the editors at *Time* magazine.

ZOU: And that was in 2000 something?

FORNEY: 2000 and? I’m not sure. I can’t remember. 2000 and? Probably 2003. Something like that. 2003, 2004 maybe 2004? *Time Asia*. You know those different *Time* magazines right? There’s *Time Asia*. Now there’s *Time* and *Time International*. But there used to be *Time Asia* and *Time Europe* right? And *Time Asia* did a cover story on Shanghai, which was purely positive. And you know in a conference call about journalists who working on this story were specifically instructed not to have a fourth paragraph which says you know beneath the shinny 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.

ZOU: I just want to make sure that’s on the record right what you said?

FORNEY: Yeah. Sure.


Nothing’s really written about. I still worked there. I didn’t want to make a big fuss right?
ZOU: Has your view about journalism changed over the course of? You worked as a journalist about 20 years right? So has your view about journalism changed during that time?

FORNEY: I don’t think so. That story I just told you, that was pretty bad and I was surprised and disappointed. But everywhere else I worked I found it, you know, highly ethical. The *Wall Street Journal* especially. This was before Robert Murdock bought it. I don’t know what’s been happening in that publication since he bought it. But you know I found the ethical standards at the *Wall Street Journal* were very high and very well protected. Everybody was clear what was ok and what was not ok. The standards were really high. *Far East Economics Review*, the same. It was great. Those were really good publications. So I don’t, I’m not jaded about journalism you know. It’s not like I saw it inside, and I think it’s a corrupt industry. I wish it was a healthier industry. I wish, I wish there was more money in it for young journalists to kinda have the opportunity that I had.

ZOU: So although, I mean, you, despite that experience, that was not the reason you don’t work as a professional journalist anymore right?

FORNEY: That’s not the reason. No no no no. no no no no. That’s not the reason at all. No, I was not, you know, that was just a *Time* magazine issue. I thought *Time* magazine was you know conducting itself in a disreputable way. But there were great journalists at *Time* magazine.

ZOU: Yeah. Of course. So I wanted to ask you what do you think of the western coverage of China in general? And I mean over the period of 20 years? Has it gotten better or worse or it’s probably just the same?
FORNEY: Actually I have an interesting answer for that. I was just having lunch with a bureau chief of a major American publication. And I asked him like who do you think is the best journalist in China now. The best foreign journalist in China. Because in the past, it had always been sort of clear who... It was always somebody who stood out. But I couldn’t find anyone who stands out now. And he couldn’t either. But he said, you know the future of journalism in China is people who were raised in China but now have an American passport and they are coming back to write about it. That’s the future of journalists, not people like us who learn Chinese, but people like you. But you have to have that American passport, otherwise you can go to jail for writing stuff. So get your American passport and come back here and you will have a. What fun you will have.

ZOU: Thank you. That’s very encouraging news for me I guess.

FORNEY: Yeah. I would hire you for sure. You are exactly the kinda person people want. You know, you know your way around China. You have classmates in high positions. That’s helpful. (Laugh.)

ZOU: I don’t know. I don’t know about that. So you mentioned that when you talked about who’s the best journalist in China before. Who are they? I’m curious what you think of as the best journalist.

FORNEY: John was really great, for the Washington Post, I don’t know if you’ve talked to him. Before him George Warefords for the Newsweek. And John Garnaut, I think it’s pronounced, he’s an Australian reporter. He worked until just a few years ago. And Jacob, James Kynge from the financial times. And Ian also.

ZOU: Ian Johnson?
FORNEY: hem. Those guys were really standout journalists. They were really great. I hope they will include me in that when you asked that.

ZOU: Because as a Chinese, I mean my exposure and my friends all, I don’t know the popular books foreign journalists have read about. The popular household names even like Peter Hessler or Evan Osnos and Leslie Chang. What do you think of them?

FORNEY: I mean, Peter Hessler is outstanding. He’s a friend also. As he’s friends with Mark too. You are basically talking to a group of friends now right? Did you know that?

ZOU: I kinda get the idea. Because I read Mark’s book and Peter Hessler, he wrote the introduction or foreword? I can’t remember which one. So I know you guys know each other.

FORNEY: The China Obscure? That introduction was fantastic. Mark wrote. Because he’s not a writer you know. He’s supposed to be a photographer. And he’s a better writer than most writers are. He’s very talented.

ZOU: Is there a circle, like journalists circle in China foreign journalists like you. I mean there are a lot more journalists now in China. But it is still relatively small in terms of …

FORNEY: You know when I was a journalist, you know, we all know each other. But we are also competitive. So it’s hard to be friends with other journalists. To be good friends. It’s not that easy. You always, you all know each other because you all share experience. And journalists are kinda fun to hang out with. You know, they tell good stories.

ZOU: I was told, some journalists say they see news cycle. I don’t know if you’ve heard that. The news cycle in China you know just repeating over a course of maybe five years, 10 years, you know? What do you think of that? Do you think it’s true?

FORNEY: I don’t think I’ve really… I’ve never thought about that one.
ZOU: I mean do you see that pattern? I’m sure you read a lot. Do you see that some stories coming up again?

FORNEY: Yeah, I’ve noticed… Yeah, I guess there were certain stories that have cycles. But the cycles are determined by… It’s not a cycle. It’s not a wheel that comes around and around right? It’s driven… It tends to be driven by… The one that I can think of most clearly would be Sino-U.S. relation. The relations between China and United States. The political relations between governments. And I find that fairly uninteresting to write about. But you know, the general. The Chinese government needs, Chinese leaders need to be, they need good relations with the U.S. It’s very complicated, as you know right? You know, Xi Jinping can’t be seen as giving in to the United States. But on the other hand, the relations between China and the United States are terrible. That’s the most important relation China has. If the most important relation is really terrible, that’s also bad. It’s actually very complicated situation. And the U.S. tends to be, the U.S. sort of natural position seems to be this sort of to antagonize China right? Over human rights or over trade or … Because, because it’s sort of political advantage for America, you know to criticize China. There’s a lot of things China needs to be criticized by the U.S. So I’m not saying the U.S. shouldn’t be criticizing China. But for instance, it was very clear in 2001, before 911 that China was gonna be America… The U.S. government was really critical. And that didn’t seem that reasonable. It seemed like more driven by domestic the U.S. problems with the relationship. And then after 911, the U.S. needed China, so the relation improved. I guess you could see that as a cycle right?

ZOU: Ok. I see what you are saying.

ZOU: Can I ask you what was your biggest fear when you worked as a journalist?
FORNEY: My biggest fear, I put a lot of pressure on… My biggest fear was that I wouldn’t be good. You know, what I really wanted to. I wanted to be the best journalist in China. I wanted to be writing the most interesting stories. I wanted to be writing stories that other people haven’t read before, which is not an easy thing to do when there’s lots of journalists around. But I always, I guess I was probably been a little too willing to sacrifice the easy stories because I was thinking about how I can do harder stories or newer stories or come up with an idea that nobody has come up before. I put a lot of pressure on myself in that way. And so that that was probably my biggest fear. It’s been selfish right? It was that I wouldn’t, you know that I wouldn’t be that good, you know. Journalism is scary because everything you write is out there for everybody to see you know. It’s not like most jobs you know. Most jobs you have a couple colleagues they know if you are good or now. But in journalism, everybody can see it. So I wanted. You know, it was really important to me that. You know I spent so much time learning Chinese and understanding China. I really wanted to be really, really good.

ZOU: Of course. You stayed in China for more than 20 years. You witnessed the change China has taken basically. I wonder what surprised you the most? I mean during that 20 years staying in China. What surprised you? How China has become, the direction China is taking or what happened here?

FORNEY: I’m surprised that the economy stayed. I’m surprised that the economy has been strong as it has been for this long. In the late 80’s, it was not clear that was gonna happen. Like during Zhu Rongji’s time, you know when people were being laid off in State enterprises by the millions right? It was not clear at all that China would be as successful as it has been. I’m totally surprised.
ZOU: Are you saying you are surprised that China has become such a big story at the turn of 21 century?

FORNEY: No, that doesn’t surprise me quite so much. But it surprised me that it has been… There’s never been a setback. I mean, you know, they never had an economic downturn in all the time that I’ve being here. Some people said they had a recession in 1998. But now nobody noticed it at the time or something. But it’s just amazing how much it’s improved and how steadily peoples’ lives have improved without ever kind of sliding backwards. You know what I mean? You go back and read stories that even I was writing in the 1990’s. It was all about, you know, in the mid-1990’s, there was no reason to think that. I mean the Communists Party was gonna stay as united. Nobody expected that. You know, coming out of 1989, those deep divisions within the Communist Party, which was just devastating for the country when the Communist Party’s fighting, you know, different factions within the Party were fighting. You know, it affects policy. It’s just kind of… That’s how you end up… But that’s how China has come through the 1980’s. And in 1989, and a lot of people thought that was gonna happen again. And I guess I was one of them. We were just totally wrong. (Laugh.) So that surprised me. It surprised me that China stayed as politically stably as it is. And the economy stayed as stable. That was a surprise.

ZOU: So one last question. Can you give one piece of advice for foreign journalist who wants to go to China and work as a journalist?

FORNEY: Yeah. Why? Do you want to come back to China?
ZOU: Well, I’m not a foreign journalist. I mean, if I go back to China. I’m a Chinese right? But for. I’m talking about foreign journalists like Americans or British, Australians going to China. What advice you would give them?

FORNEY: You have to learn Chinese. Your Chinese has to be very good.

ZOU: Everybody says the same thing.

FORNEY: I mean. There have been a couple of journalists here who did a pretty good job who couldn’t speak Chinese because they were very experienced journalists. They know how to write stories. If you really wanna. If you really wanna have, you really need to be able to speak Chinese. How can you cover China and not speak Chinese? So speak Chinese and… I mean one thing I found very helpful was that I worked for radio, newswires, newspapers, and magazines. So I can write in different styles right because you work really hard on your writing. Work hard hard hard on your writing. I guess I would give that advice like you know, read everything, talk to people about it, read all the stuff out loud. Like really, really, really taught yourself to write.

Interview with Chris Hawke

Recorded on July 8, 2014

Introduction: Hawke worked as a journalist with more than two decades of experience, studying Chinese, teaching journalism at Communication University of China and writing freelance stories. He worked as a newspaper delivery boy growing up in the rural town Orillia in southern Ontario, Canada. But the idea of working as a journalist first dawned on him during the autumn of 1989, when he backpacked through East Europe and with some planning but some good luck witnessed the Iron Curtain fall. He moved to Japan in his early 20s, armed with a portfolio of news stories he wrote during a paid
internship at the Queens University student newspaper. This lead to a job as a proofreader at the English version of Japan's most prestigious newspaper, The Asahi Shimbun, then a job as a correspondent at United Press International, first in Tokyo, then in New York City. He lived in New York for nine years and worked at CBSNews.com until the dot-com bubble burst, leaving thousands of New York journalists unemployed. During this time, he worked as a secretary at a big corporation and studied part-time at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, earning his degree in 2004. During this time, he worked weekends as CBSNews.com, and became the weekend supervisor on graduation. With the goal of reporting from China, he took a job at the Associated Press Asian editing hub in Bangkok in 2005. Although AP dispatched him to China twice when the bureau was short-staffed (he was also dispatched to Kabul and Islamabad), the bureau could not hire him without strong language skills. Realizing that his efforts to teach himself Chinese in Bangkok would not be sufficient, he resigned and moved to China in 2007. He has quitted his job teaching at the Communication University and working at Global Times this fall. At the age of 54, he is now a musician. (Information coming from interview and

his website.)

ZOU: So first of all, I know you came to China in 2005 or 6?

HAWKE: I first came here in around 2004, on a, to meet a friend on vacation. I really liked it. I decided I’d like to move here someday. Maybe decide is a strong… I decided I wanted to. And then I got a job with the Associated Press. After I graduated from Columbia in about 2005, yeah, and I said to them I’d like to move to Asia with the goal to going to China eventually. They said, yeah, that would be great. You will have to learn Chinese first. First we will send you to Bangkok where our Asia headquarter is. So I
worked at the Asian headquarter for two and a half years. And in 2006, they assigned me to Beijing for a week to cover someone who’s sick basically. And I really enjoyed working here. But I had been studying Chinese in Bangkok. But, as you may know learning Chinese is not that easy. So, I came back a year later to do the same thing. And although I had continued to study Chinese that year, it wasn’t any, people totally didn’t understand me the first time. And they totally didn’t understand me the second time. I was like, ok, I will never learn Chinese in Bangkok. If I want to learn Chinese, I got to move to China. So I quitted my job at the Associated Press. Got a job at the university here teaching news. That was in 2007 at the Communication University of China. And, so I’ve lived here contiguously since 2007.

ZOU: You said like you are, basically, you really liked Beijing the first trip while you were here, while you were staying with your friends. What really strike you? What really got you interested? Tell me just one thing.

HAWKE: What’s gonna happen to this because the real reason? I don’t really want it be in prints where the Chinese government can see it. So what are you gonna do with the interview?

ZOU: Right. Right. It’s part of my research project for my master’s project. So it will be published on Missouri School of Journalism’s website. I might write an article and pitch it to publications.

HAWKE: Let me put it this way. China was changing very fast. And I wanted to be here to see the big changes I was expecting to take place. That’s why I came.

ZOU: I’m gonna ask what type of changes are you expecting?
HAWKE: I don’t know. It’s just changing so quickly. For example, when I was here in 2006 and 2007, especially 2006, lots of this district wasn’t even here. Most of these tall buildings were not here. That one wasn’t, this one wasn’t, that one wasn’t. All these tall ones weren’t here. (Pointing to different buildings.) All new. And at that time, there’s cranes everywhere. Anywhere you were in the central part of Beijing, there would’ve been between 6 to 12 cranes dotting the skyline around. And the construction was going on like 24/7, so even in the mid of the night, there was the sound of cranes moving and sparks going through the tops of these buildings. So the society was obviously changing really really fast. And you know for a journalist, that’s interesting.

ZOU: Tell me the things you noticed about then got, give you this impression that the things are changing so fast and things are gonna keep changing you know for the next few years. What gave you that impression?

HAWKE: Well, other than the rapid pace of economic change which I already mentioned, my friends I was visiting in 2004 were Fulbright scholars, one of them was Fulbright scholars, and she was doing work for independent Chinese cinema, so I was exposed to a lot of like activists, artists who were kind of political artists, musicians, whose music was, although perhaps the lyrics weren’t overly political, the whole artistic stands was like a direct challenge to the conventions of the society, and so I felt like there was a shift in the cultural, hm, how should I say? Like a (pause) the attitude of citizens toward society, toward the government, I thought there’s gonna be some big cultural changes. Perhaps, perhaps in a similar way to the changes that took place in America between 50’s and 60’s, I was sensing something like that in the air. But in retrospect, I kind of misread it.
ZOU: What you mean? What didn’t happen? What happened?

HAWKE: Well, the society changes very rapidly as I expected. But it changed in a, in a direction that I totally wasn’t expecting. I had been exposed, because of my friends, who were either the first time like scholars, and the second time, journalists, the people I was expose to are basically in jail or don’t do work publicly anymore or gave up doing what they were doing. They were a minority. The majority have become very, the society’s changed, but it’s becoming very consumer-oriented, very family-focused, very inward-looking, yeah. Something like that. So the culture changed, but it didn’t change into like, it didn’t change into, for example, people don’t care about politics here. They just care about themselves. So I thought that it was going to, for example, I thought the media, the rights of newspapers was going to become more open. But in fact, it’s becoming increasingly closed. And I thought that the legal rights of people were going stronger and stronger since I got here. But in fact, they were just rounding up lawyers and putting them in jail now. The direction that I thought that the change would go, it’s all gone the opposite way. This is a more restricted, less free, less open-minded place than it was when I first got here in 2007, which is the exact opposite direction I thought it would go.

ZOU: Why are you still here?

HAWKE: It didn’t affect me. It’s still an interesting place. Am I disappointed on behalf of the Chinese people? No. Because because the Chinese people are getting what they want. It’s part of the story right? Like what I wanted the Chinese people to want for themselves is not what they wanted, which is one of the things I’ve learned from coming here. My dream of the 60’s coming true in China is not the Chinese dream of what they want for themselves. So I’m, I stay here because I keep learning about the country and
what makes it tick. And well, I might not like some of the things I’m finding out. And I have to say I’m not very happy with the direction the country is going in any way. And the young people are taught journalism to, I basically find to be selfish, shallow, consumeristic people who don’t care about the society at all. I’m sort of appalled the level of civic awareness among mainland Chinese people, and the way they treat each other. It’s the way it is. It’s an important part of the Chinese story and it’s an important thing for people to understand. So you know, I’m not a journalist because I’m like a cheerleader of the West and I want the West team to win. When the West ideas are ascendant I’m happy when they are descendent I’m like sad. I’m just here to watch this very important place at a very important time in history and see what happens. So I think interesting things are still happening. Although I found it disconcerting, maybe a little bit chilling, that doesn’t mean it’s not interesting. It means in some ways it makes it more interesting.

ZOU: How do you see your purpose here, career-wise and personal-wise?

HAWKE: I feel there’s a lot of very talented Western people here trying to do a kind of daily journalism, kind of like the New York Times, Associated Press done a lot of daily journalism, I don’t feel any need to step into that gap because there’s lots of capable people doing it. And I don’t think it’s that interesting to do. I mean for me personally, it’s, it’s difficult. The conditions are hard. You can get deported, not deported, but you, they can refuse to give you visa again all the time, people get threatened with that all the time. The conditions are unwelcoming. I don’t think Chinese people in general really appreciate the efforts of the Western press, more so before then than now, consider them to be kind of enemies and foreign agents. So doing that kind of work here isn’t really of
interest to me because, like I said, some people are happy to do it. And I’m not really an agent of the West. And I don’t like to be treated as such. It’s just like a world I never imagined for myself before I went into journalism. Furthermore, I’m not really sure that all these Western reporters are helping anything as much as they might like to think they are. So, so I’m not so attracted to doing that kind of work anymore. I do have some friends who do some thoughtful, long-form journalism, basically as freelancers, and their pieces get included in magazines. I respect them and what they are doing a lot. And I think they do a lot more to create some intelligent discourse around China than a lot of the daily journalism that goes on which… for me, as someone who lives here, falls into some sort of predictable types of stories. Not to say that there’s anything wrong with that, but I, at certain point, you have to ask yourself, what’s the value of writing stories like that? 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? So.

ZOU: How do you see your role as a journalist working here?

HAWKE: Well, I basically don’t consider myself a journalist anymore. Yeah I’m working here at state media, which is very tightly controlled. I tried to teach journalism skills to the young reporters and did so successfully for a while. But the management told me to stop.

ZOU: The management of?
HAWKE: The management of the paper. Yeah. They didn’t want me to do that. I was forbidden from going to pitch meetings. I was forbidden from getting included in the stories until they are right about to be copy-edited. So we can’t really say the things that happen here are journalism because it’s, it’s not. It’s propaganda. They have some journalistic assad to it, but at the bottom, it’s 100 percent pure propaganda. And although there are certainly a number of brave Chinese journalists who push the envelope and who are really admirable people, they, they are sort the exception that proves the rule, because if you look what happens to them. They always get shut down and bad things happen to them. So I think it’s fair to say there’s not really journalism in China in the way that we understand it in the West. It’s propaganda here. Of course people can say there’s the Nanfangzhoumo³, but you know, look what’s been happening there over the last two years. I mean, there’s the constant trend. The Party is infiltrated into the South China Morning Post. I mean the direction is bad. So working here I can’t say I’m a journalist, I have to say I have given up on journalism. I’m just doing it for the money. It’s a money thing.

ZOU: So how do you identify yourself now?

HAWKE: Musician.

ZOU: Do you want to maybe try something else to continue to work as a journalist or?

HAWKE: I want to move to Dali in September, and I really like doing journalism here, I’m sorry, doing music here. Because one of the things I don’t like about journalism in China is that it creates a kind of antagonistic relationship between the two societies. I don’t see a lot of journalism goes on that makes Chinese feel good about America, and

³ Southern Weekly, a progressive weekly newspaper devoted to investigative journalism.
makes Americans feel good about China. Not that it’s journalists’ job to do that. And I’m not criticizing journalists for being not being more positive, unlike many Chinese people who would criticize American journalists for not being more positive. But I do understand what the Chinese people who say American journalist isn’t positive. I understand what they are trying to get at. I’m not just discounting what they are saying. I think they don’t understand what the Americans are trying to do. But the fact is it’s kind of created the bad vibe between the two countries. And I think that it would be really good if there was more understanding between China and the United States on the whole and more goodwill. And there’s some really valuable things about North American culture. I’m actually Canadian, and I’m playing American music. So it’s a little confusing. But I feel like the cultural heritage I have in Americans is basically similar.

HAWKE: Yeah, if you want to put it in a hippy way. Yeah. Yeah. And so Chinese people actually really love the music, the traditional American music and dancing. We teach them. It really creates good feelings between the two countries. And most of the journalism actually creates bad feelings between the two countries. I’ve only got certain amount of time on this earth. I would rather focus on doing something that brings people together than tears them apart. Yeah, I’m identifying myself as musician. And I hope to spend whatever years I remain in China doing music and if I do, do continue writing, which I would like to do, I would like to do some writing that cast more sunlight on the situation than shadows. Like I don’t want to do, if I do some writing, I want people to read it and learn something new about China that’s not gonna make them feel bad about China. Not that I feel like I should apologize for China or anything, I’ve made it quite
clear that I think the general direction that the government is going is really just terrible and worrisome. But there’s lots of other people making everyone worried about it. And that’s not everything that’s going on here. Like it’s not my personal Chinese experience. So in terms of all those skills I’ve learned from being a journalist for all these years, I would like to do, I would like to write about Chinese traditional musicians. Folk musicians, or modern Chinese musicians, using Chinese folk traditions. There are some amazing musicians doing some really good stuff that I think some people would be very happy to hear about. So I’d like to write about that to the extent that I do writing. And that would be my next project writing.

ZOU: So you are saying bye to your journalism career?


ZOU: What? Can’t do journalism in China?

HAWKE: Don’t think so. You can. You can. But people who do it well are always at risk of not being able to come back. They’ve created an atmosphere where it’s very difficult to do journalism. And my life is short. I don’t have to do journalism.

ZOU: How old are you?

HAWKE: I’m 54.

ZOU: Okay. So when you come here, you were?

HAWKE: 37.

ZOU: You talk about you worked at the Communication University, *Global Times*, both are state-controlled media, and, so what’s that experience like? Why did you take the job in the first place?
HAWKE: I took a job at the Communication University of China in the first place because it, because it, I needed to get a job. I was here working for AP, and I realized that I would need to come here and study and I just sort of shook the tree for a job a little bit. And the cameraman at AP’s friend with the Dean at the CUC School. She just hired me on the spot over the phone. I was already teaching journalism in Thailand part-time as I was working at AP. I kinda wanted, you know, I’ve been pretty lucky in my life, I got this Columbia degree and worked around the world. I think journalism can be important. I just wanted to share. I certainly wasn’t doing it for the money. And similar here, I thought it would be cool to do. And also, back to your original question why I came here, I imagined that I would find at CUC a bunch of young people yearning for social change, yearning for social justice, interested in right and wrong, interested in like helping China grow into a better country and a better society. What I found was a bunch of disengaged kids who regretted taking their major, who wanted to get on TV, maybe as a talk show, maybe in a sports program, and were highly nationalistic, and not very thoughtful frankly. So of course, amongst them, in every class of 30, maybe I will meet five or six kids who has like, you had an original thought or two in your lifetime. But most of them, honestly, kind of, kind of shallow, kind of shallow, and also shallow sounds very judgmental, maybe I should just say they have a value system that is very different from mine. They just cared about making their parents proud, getting a good job, maybe they really wanted to get a Beijing hukou, maybe they were worried about how they could possibly get enough money to find an apartment. They have their insular concerns. And now I’ve lived here for a while, I can kind of see why. Caring about larger issues doesn’t get you very far in China anyway, so people just give up. So in a way I don’t blame any
individual one person for adopting such a like defensive, selfish strategy. Although I think you can see that the result of everyone thinking that way is a not very nice society in a lot of ways. But yeah, I mean…

ZOU: Do you still teach there?

HAWKE: I do. But I will resign in September. I’m leaving this job and that job and moving to Dali.

ZOU: Both of them?

HAWKE: Yeah.

ZOU: Did you have fun teaching there?

HAWKE: Sometimes. Yeah. I did. You know, we did a school newspaper in my first year there. That was really, really fun. Everyone really liked it. It was independent. It didn’t go through the Party or anything, self-funded. And you never guess why it got shut down. We wrote about Tibet, we wrote about Taiwan, we wrote about sensitive political issues. It got shut down because we wrote a story about kids skipping classes, which made some of the teachers mentioned in the article feel like, really like their pride was hurt, and they lost face. And so…

ZOU: No kidding.

HAWKE: Does that surprise you?

ZOU: Yeah. It is. It’s funny in a way. It’s kind of ironic.

HAWKE: Yeah. So that was fun and …

ZOU: So you guys did that for a year?
HAWKE: Yeah. And actually as I go to thank my dean who’s always been very good to me and helped me throughout the whole process, I’m gonna actually give her some down copies of that newspapers as a kind of going-away gift.

ZOU: Souvenirs?

HAWKE: Yeah.

ZOU: What else surprised you during your eight, nine years here?

HAWKE: I’m surprised all the times.

ZOU: What surprised you today?

HAWKE: What surprised me today?

ZOU: Yeah, or this week.

HAWKE: Okay. So I’m, getting to move to Dali. And one of the inspirations for me to move to Dali was a friend of a friend, who I guess is an acquaintance, who found a beautiful wooden, oak farmers courtyard I guess that he decided to rent. He got a ten-year lease on it for a 5000 yuan or something, 50,000 Yuan for a month, which for the farmer I guess that was a good deal. It was abandoned. No one lived there. The family, as you can imagine, these little villages, the sons and daughters have all moved to the city, because there’s no work in the little villages anymore. So he was able to get this abandoned, kind of run-down, but to a foreigner, it’s really quite beautiful you know. It just needed work. And they’ve been renovating it with the help of local people. But it burned down.

ZOU: What happened?

HAWKE: I don’t know what happened. I still want to know what happened.

ZOU: Is it a natural incident? A fire?
HAWKE: Well, you are asking the very question that me and my friends here in Beijing are wondering. Yeah, right? Because like some of us thought he was taking a very large risk taking a ten-year lease on a property and renovating it. Because as you know, contracts are not that strong here, not that secure here. And I, I had some concern that he would put a lot of money into it, make it really nice and then the farmer would take it back, find some loophole, and because you know it was just this run-down thing before, so it was only worth you know 5000 Yuan a year, but now it’s like almost a hotel level, he can rent that out as a vacation home for you know 10, or 20, 50 times that amount of money. He’s gonna be highly incentive to find a loophole and push him out, right? So with me thinking that, and then the fire happening, you know, do the math?

ZOU: What surprised you?

HAWKE: The fire?

ZOU: No, you mentioned this…

HAWKE: I was surprised because I was thinking of renting, leasing a place beside his in the same village with a similar set-up, and now oh, it could burn down. Another friend did the same thing, and he was trying to install a basically sewer system, to make a long story short, the villagers kind of had a small riot and prevented him from attaching his sewer system to the public line, which is another thing that’s making me more suspicious about the fire. If that hadn’t happen, the small riot hadn’t happened, then I would be more like oh I guess fires happen. Although it was weird because no one was living there right? Sort of weird that a fire would sort of spontaneously happen and no one’s there, right? Like if people are living there, then you know, the smoke, cooking or something like that? So yeah, so, so, so these pieces of news both surprised me. Actually on Sunday, I was
going to go to Dali, and lease a place there, so it would be ready when I move down in
September, now because I’m surprised by these two pieces of news. I’m thinking, maybe
not, maybe just go in September and talk to people, see maybe they will know what
caused the fire by then. Maybe you know there will be more information. Maybe this
village is not the right place to lease a place. Maybe try some other.
ZOU: The insecurity now gets you?
HAWKE: Totally. Totally.
ZOU: The whole society is insecure.
HAWKE: Absolutely. And I just had a conversation with a friend of mine who’s a high-
level translator at a very important state English language literary magazine. Recently
you know, they kind of pushed all the foreigner editors out in a way. Like it’s not exactly
that simple here right? The foreigners get nudged, but you can’t just say they were
pushed out. Actually they were pushed out if you look at it. So yeah, he was saying to
me, he knows China better than I do. He’s been here longer. He can translate like
literature. That’s what he does. He’s like, Chris, you know, I like China. I wouldn’t mind
staying here. But I would not like to get involved with doing business in China because
basically what you are saying it’s too insecure, he just doesn’t want to have to deal with
the, the kind of lawlessness that exists here. I mean, Chinese people when they all say it’s
all guanxi here; that is the polite way of saying it’s any way it goes. People can do,
contracts don’t matter. People can do, if someone changes their mind and you don’t have
the guanxi to back it up, you are just out of luck. So he, it’s very insecure. In business,
you call it regulatory risk.
ZOU: So besides this, what frustrates you most living in China? It could be anything, not necessarily about journalism.

HAWKE: My biggest annoyance is the pollution in Beijing. I mean it’s very serious. Today we are sitting outside and we cannot actually see, like the sky has different shades. There’s like a little bit blue over there, it’s kinda gray over there, it’s kinda white, but as you know, for the last week, that has not been the case. It’s been a gray, a bizmo sky. And the pollution has almost been unhealthier as it is everyday. It affects peoples’ moods. It brings people down. And it makes people sick. So absolutely the biggest, the number one reason why for example I’m moving to Dali in the first place, and the biggest. In 2007, I never imagined I would come here and I would be forced to move out of the city because of the pollution. Remember when I said I felt everything was moving to a better direction in 2007. This was just before the Olympics right? Which is a big reason why I had this impression. Because up to that point, the press was opening, and the rule of law was improving. And also at that time, pollution levels in Beijing particularly were going down year by year. But I never imagined that the pollution would not only get worse, but it would get so bad that the city would become practically inhabitable. But that’s what happened as far as I’m concerned. Obviously different people might think I’m exaggerating because lots of people are staying here and they are happy. So. But I mean, for me, the pollution’s become so serious that it’s untenable for me to live here in a long term. Of course I could live here for another year if I felt like there were some compelling reason to do so. But would I raise children here? No, I think it’s really irresponsible. Sure, the good schools here have dorms and schoolyards with the air cleaners and the classrooms have air cleaner, your home has air cleaners. But it’s a big place. There’s just
places to live where your children don’t need air cleaners, or you, for that matter. So that would be my number one frustration with living here. In terms of getting along with Chinese people or whatever, I’ve been here for seven years, so I’m pretty used to it. I mean…

ZOU: Used to what?

HAWKE: Living here. Dealing with Chinese people. Used to what? You mean like what were the things that most foreigners find annoying when they first moved here? I think you can just read any expat website and find out you know. People have difficulties with their employers and landlords saying one thing and doing another to an extent that wouldn’t probably happen in their home countries for instance. Stuff like that.

ZOU: And now you get used to it?

HAWKE: Totally. You know, well, if I make a contract or deal with someone here, I go into with my eyes open. I don’t expect to get 100 percent of what’s been promised. And you just sort of build that into your calculus when going through day-to-day life. I think what I’m saying wouldn’t surprise any Chinese person. I think they themselves operate that way all the way, you know, all the way through. They are all aware that people say they can do this, but what they can actually do are two different things. That’s why they like to drink with each other and have dinner with each other, so like they can get to scope out like what can this person can really deliver or is willing to deliver compared to what they say they can deliver.

ZOU: So in general, how has your experience working in China changed you, if any?

HAWKE: Oh, it changed me a lot. I think I’m almost, I think a lot people wouldn’t recognize me in some ways. I was really naïve when I came here. I’m this small down
guy from this little city in Canada. People just tell the truth all the time. Really trusting. And they are worried about their reputations because it’s a small town, so if you get caught in a couple of lies, no one wants to do business with you anymore. It’s very different. Any big city in Canada or New York, Toronto, it’s very different from that. And in China, it’s just a whole different level of that. 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 hard ball with people and call them on stuff. Yeah. So I think that’s how I’ve changed. And well, those changes might not sound very positive. As long as I can still retain my integrity, I think those will serve me well even if I go back to Canada.

ZOU: What you considered integrity that’s non-compromising?

HAWKE: Well, it’s funny you’d asked that. I would totally lie to a Chinese person, but I wouldn’t lie to another Canadian. Yeah. I think when I’m dealing with Chinese and I’m dealing with Westerners, I use two very different… You have to get… by cultural, right? Sort of. Deal with these people this way, deal with these people that way because that’s how they are gonna deal with me. That’s how it’s done here. But I think some of the skills that you learn from dealing with each set of people; some of them would be transferable to your advantage. At least that’s what I hope. So I guess we will see when I go back home.

ZOU: Do you feel you are moving to a direction where you feel comfortable or you wanted right now? Or it has gone in a different way. In retrospect, do you have any regrets?
HAWKE: I guess not. Would I have come here if I thought coming here would make me just give up on the idea of being a journalist? Absolutely not, because I came here to fulfill my journalistic dreams. And instead, I’ve given up on them. So… That being said, when you told me that you wanted to be a writer, but decided to be a journalist instead, I wanted to interrupt and say something. And maybe I can now or I can after. But when I was a little kid, I didn’t want to be a journalist. I wanted to be a musician. And now I’m being a musician. And being musician is bringing joy to other people and bringing joy to me. Being a journalist was fun in a way, but it was really ego-driven. Very highly ego-driven, which I don’t know if it’s very healthy for me really in the long-term, so I don’t regret giving up on journalism and finding something that I personally find… I don’t know… more rewarding isn’t exactly the right word because journalism was really rewarding for me. I think maybe more nurturing for my sole.

ZOU: What you mean?

HAWKE: Music, music, yeah. It just makes you sleep better if during the day you made 50 people smile and have the best time they had all week and let off some steam and also feel more positive about America, and you know, what America represents than if you say wrote a story about how the American-backed government in Afghanistan is so corrupt that half of the people coming to the central airport with heroine are just walking away freely. These give you two totally different… Your day just goes different way. The way you feel about the world is quite different. So all that was great story that I wrote. It didn’t get published because, because… for reasons that I still don’t understand, and you know, it’s just, it’s just kind you are putting yourself in a world of negativity, and I think if you hang out with journalists, which I’m sure you will a lot, you are going to find that
although they are incredibly curious and intelligent and can be quite engaging to talk to, there’s also something a little bit competitive and ego-driven and there’s some journalists that you meet who will be like you are a really good person and you are trying to do good things. But I think that’s not also really. I mean I’m sorry to say that. Maybe it is when they are all 22. But I think by the time they are 30 or 35, maybe something changes, so…

Yeah.

ZOU: What you mean exactly ego-driven? I kind of get what you mean…

HAWKE: They want to prove how smart they are. They got the best analysis and they got a handle on it all. These guys are bad, but they are not fooling me because I’m smarter than them. And I’m gonna tell you how bad they are cause I know and I will tell you.

ZOU: You think that’s the original sin of journalists?

HAWKE: The thing I still really I like about journalism is that the idea of giving a voice to the people who have no power. I think that’s the important thing about journalism that is really valuable. But a lot of people lose that and just become … trying to get on the front page or trying to get a promotion, even trying to keep your job. I mean it’s like a really competitive field. So even journalist was really really tough thing to do, and I don’t want to sound like I don’t admire them because I totally admire them. But yeah your integrity will be tested constantly all the way through, as I suppose it is in, well, I think journalists have, I think it’s tested for journalists, politicians and people in the public sphere a little bit more. What was your original question?

ZOU: No, that’s fine. So do you have any advice for journalists who want to come to China to work here?
HAWKE: Learn the language would be my first tip. Absolutely learn the language.

ZOU: Even though it’s such a huge commitment, and it takes years and countless hours to do that?

HAWKE: Yeah, I think coming here without learning the language is… You are always gonna be confined to writing superficial stories or pirating other peoples’ opinions. You will never really know it yourself. So my advice would definitely be learn the language. And I mean it’s a wonderful place full of stories. There’s a lot you can do here. Yeah, I wouldn’t discourage people from coming over to do journalism. I would encourage them to learn the language. If they think they are going to come over and like crusade for the rights of people, I would, (Long pause.) I wouldn’t discourage them from coming here for that reason. But I think they would in for a journey, and I think that their views on it will become more complicated and nuanced over time. And that’s a good thing. That’s a good thing for journalists professionally too. There’s a Jonathan Spence book. I think it was one of his first books. I think he’s written it in 1969 that all about foreign experts who come to China with the hope of saving it or helping it. And I think that… is very useful for journalists coming over here. I think it got lots of good insights.

ZOU: One last question, what do you think of the Western coverage of China?

HAWKE: 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. And you will understand what those things are. But, but I don’t think the Western, and I don’t blame them for this because it’s very difficult to do, but I don’t think that the Western coverage particularly can get beyond those preoccupations, which well very important to us are not very
important to Chinese people. And as a result, I don’t think the coverage helps Westerners understand China very much. They can understand how China is not like us, and how China is a threat to our values, so they are good at covering that, which is all true. But it doesn’t really help us understand how areas where China might not be a threat to us, and areas where there might be opportunities here? Is this opportunity cultural opportunities? There might be grounds for cooperation? And also, also, because they are focusing on this like frontier of where American values clash with Chinese values, and they can’t seem to get to far past that, I think they might be missing the… There are some scary things about China that are scarier than this band of things that the West covers. And that also isn’t getting covered.

ZOU: What you mean?

HAWKE: Just the way Chinese people look at the environment, the way Chinese people think about government, the way Chinese people think about war, the way nationalism in China has, has been covered relatively successfully. But there, and that’s alarming I think, but there’s the attitude of Chinese people can be alarming in some other ways. So I guess what I’m trying to say is the coverage isn’t that deep.

ZOU: The coverage isn’t that deep?

HAWKE: The coverage isn’t that deep. And 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 or what they care about or what they are preoccupied with or how they might react if the government decides to wimp them into a frenzy and try to go to war, which you know, which could well happen, will probably happen. Yeah, so so, that’s what I think about the coverage.
ZOU: A lot more to be done.

HAWKE: Yeah. I think it’s really important for people like you and me to try build cultural bridges between the two countries sincerely because I think the consequence of us not doing it could be quite serious and quite bad. I don’t… I don’t necessarily see… China could go to the war with maybe not America directly, but things could get tense between the countries and the two sides could be wimped up into feeling like each other are the enemies? I feel like the Chinese people already feel like United States is their enemy to an extent that Americans don’t get. So maybe that’s one of the things or the areas where I feel the coverage is lacking. Then again maybe that’s why I want to get out of the Huanqiushibao (Global Times) because I think the Huanqiushibao (Global Times) is like one of the major instruments that are causing those sorts of feelings to spread and thank god lots of people don’t read it. But lots of people do. Lots of people do.

ZOU: Well, I don’t know anyone who reads it. No offense.

HAWKE: Good. Good. It’s the highest-circulated newspaper in China.

ZOU: Really? Watch out. A bee!

HAWKE: Really. It would be fine.

ZOU: Thanks. That’s all my questions.

HAWKE: Ok. I guess it might not be what you expected.

**Interview Notes with David Barboza**

Date of Interview: August 26

Introduction: David Barboza has been a correspondent for *The New York Times* based in Shanghai, China, since November 2004. In 2013, Barboza was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting “for his striking exposure of corruption at high levels of the
Chinese government, including billions in secret wealth owned by relatives of the prime minister, well-documented work published in the face of heavy pressure from the Chinese officials.” He was also part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting. Barboza was a freelance writer and a research assistant for *The New York Times* before being hired in 1997 as a staff writer. For five years, he was the Midwest business correspondent based in Chicago. Since 2008, he has served as the paper’s Shanghai bureau chief. Barboza graduated from Boston University with a bachelor’s degree in history and attended Yale University Graduate School. He lives in Shanghai with his wife, Lynn Zhang. (Bio from *The New York Times*)

ZOU: Do you report differently?

BARBOZA: No. Of course I don’t need a translator if I report in the U.S. As journalists, you are always gonna have biases. Different Americans are different, have different biases. Americans from the mid-west are different from Americans from California. If you are trained in major American newspapers such as *the New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, your approach to a story is similar. The basics are similar. How they do their reporting and what materials they submit. We probably used similar approach. Individuals may be a bit different. Should be careful in doing stories that simplifies a story, simplified generalization. Be aware of the pitfalls of simplified approaches. Different Americans have common values, but they are also different. The basis of journalism doesn’t change: Pyramid structure; Multiple sources; How to use quotes. Any newsroom, That’s the fundamentals. That’s the part that’s easy.
But better publications have higher standards. You interviewed three people; I
interviewed 10 people. That’s different.

ZOU: Would you approach sources and quote differently?

BARBOZA: Why would I quote differently? When you go to a foreign country, you
adapt a little to the country. When you look for a boyfriend in a different country, do you
change your standard? You would say: I’d like a nice person.

ZOU: Some would say that they need to protect their sources?

BARBOZA: I’m not doing a lot of human rights stories; I’m not writing about revolution.
I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about protecting sources. It depends on what stories
you are reporting on. What I’m concerned is the quality of my sources and the
information s/he gives me. Why is this person telling me this? Is the information
accurate? If I’m covering human rights issues, that would be different. I’m glad I’m not
doing that. 90% of reporting in China is not dealing with sources that are that sensitive.

As an economics, business and cultural reporter, I try hard to get people to be quoted of
saying things, not because they are sensitive topics or they are afraid. They don’t want to
say bad things about a company or a person. I struggle to find good information and
honest people. There was one time I need to be concerned about protecting my sources.

When workers sign the contract with Foxconn, they were told they can’t talk to the
media. So I can’t identify the sources. I have a source that agrees to be photographed.

Then I need to go through with Foxconn to tell them what I’m working on and why the
story is important and try to make sure that they will not punish the worker after the story
is published.
How do I cover the U.S.? The same. Hard work, determination, sensitive, open-minded, balanced and fair. Yeah, the president of China is annoyed by the coverage. You think Obama isn’t annoyed? They don’t do the same thing. They don’t block out website. They punish us too. We are not allowed to (do something) for two months. They stop us from getting information. They don’t react in the same way. We do what we think is right. Some people have this idea that China is a terrible place for foreign journalists. They harass foreign journalists. Some of them are true, some are not. Every country feels our coverage is not fair to them. Our Mid-East coverage, the Jews think we favor muslims; and the muslims think we favor the other side.

ZOU: Journalists often complain that it’s hard to get access to government officials.

BARBOZA: The Chinese might deal with the media a bit differently. People in China don’t talk. Not true. People want to talk. I find that true everywhere. People are willing to talk. The governmental officials? You can’t get access to them. That’s because they (governmental officials) are all scared. The white house is always upset. They will be annoyed. But they know how the business is done. If the government officials don’t talk to me, I just have to do my job without them. It may mean my story is not as good. It doesn’t have their perspective. But that doesn’t affect me. I want to do a fair story. It’s easy to find sources in China. Sources are not people who secretly give you information. I don’t want that kind of sources, because how can I know what they said is true? I will talk to them, but I don’t know if I can trust them. Good sources are people who know a lot. I’m not here as an observer, though I’m observing. I’m here as a journalist. Journalism is education. My role is not to change China or America. My goal is not to leave China thinking I got them to improve human rights. That’s not my problems.
To write good stories, educate people, and find the truth. Honest, fair, open up a window for people to know what’s going on. I’m not here to promote anything. Write truthfully, honestly and be fair. My goal is not to worry if my story is positive or negative. Is China good or bad? No, that’s not what I’m concerned. I’m not that important to change the world. To write good stories, work hard and set the bar high. My goal is not to win awards. I want to do work that I’m proud of. It’s nice to hear compliments. But you know your story is not good.

I like being here. I feel for whatever, I wouldn’t be here if China isn’t special. I like China, Chinese people, Chinese culture. Yeah, it is a good story. But I love the Chinese history, Chinese language, instruments, music… Even I like a performer very much, I would not leave out one negative thing about the person. My job is not to be their friend. You should be ashamed if you are promoting people. Then you are not doing your job. It’s the same when you are attacking people unfairly. I’m certainly in love with the country. But that doesn’t affect my ethics. I don’t count my stories and say how much should be positive and how much should be negative. But if it’s 100% negative, you got to ask, if there anything positive? What matters to me is: is this news and is this interesting, not if this is negative or positive, or good or bad. There’re always good and bad.

I like the people. I like their modesty. Chinese, Asians are modest. I like the history. The jades, bronzes, calligraphy, designs, traditional clothing, taiji, the sound of mandarin, food, Chinese people’s emphasize on education, how hard Chinese people work. I felt close to China when I first came here. I don’t know why. It’s not because China is beautiful. China has many ugly cities. I don’t always know why. I like Chinese people;
they are colorful, hard working. I don’t think Chinese are any different than other people. They cheat on little things. Maybe it’s because there’s no rule. Maybe it’s because of the poverty for so long, who knows. I had several Chinese girlfriends, Asians. They are very friendly to outsiders. The Germany, U.S. Well, Brazil, Brazilians are nice and friendly. Asia, although I have not gone to Korea, I like the people. A lot of places are a mess. But my personal feelings don’t affect my reporting. Maybe it does; I just don’t know. But I will write bad things when I see bad things. I don’t think Westerners have more morals or ethics. I’m in favor of the Chinese/Asia. That’s my bias. The history, the modern history, ancient history, they are tragic and beautiful. I wouldn’t want to live in those times, but different traditional artifacts come from those times, such as the jade, porcelain, traditional paintings, Chinese characters. I could study them in my entire life. Staying here for ten years doesn’t make me like China more. I have a greater appreciation of China when I first came here. I went to a lot of traditional dance performances and listen to Chinese music.

ZOU: Has being a history major affected your reporting?
BARBOZA: No. But I do like to give background of a company or a person in an article. Journalists are writing early drafts of history.

ZOU: What do you think of the Western coverage?
BARBOZA: I don’t have an answer to that. It’s hard to generalize. Some of the best stuff has been written by foreign journalists. Some of the best journalists are here in China. I can say the same thing about every country. Some of the best journalists are in Mid-East. I don’t think the question is very meaningful. There’s good journalism in the U.S.; there are bad journalism in the U.S. It’s the same in every country. There are more journalists
in the U.S. There are fewer people in China. If there’s only one person, that person can only do so much. CNN doesn’t even have one correspondent here. The coverage of China in the past 30 years. It’s hard to generalize. We have more access, we have more people than they did 20 years ago. People are more willing to talk. The Internet helps. But are our coverage better? I don’t know.

ZOU: Any regret?

BARBOZA: My Chinese isn’t good enough. Lots of regrets. When I look at a story, there’s things I’d like to change. I think there’s something wrong if you don’t have any regret. I’m happy with how hard I’ve worked in China.

ZOU: Optimism?

BARBOZA: When you are living in a foreign country, it can be exciting. You also have a lot of pressures. Probably every country is similar. You get frustrated. There will be parts of the country they don’t like. You get homesick. Emotionally they go through a circle of. It’s like dating. You get married. It’s not as wonderful. The reality sets in. Some people get a divorce. I hear that between 2004 and 2008, there’s optimism. The government was more welcoming for the Olympics. China is a lot easier for me actually. Yeah, I can’t get on Google. Journalists are harassed more. I’m harassed. But I’ve seen new things coming out. Chinese people are richer than they were in 2004. Chinese people, their standards get higher. But if you ask me how the government treated journalists? Yes, that has gotten worse. But that doesn’t affect my reporting. I will focus on my job. The conditions for the journalists aren’t good. But the Chinese peoples’ life are not as good as they used to be? I don’t know. I haven’t seen a good poll. If you ask me if I want to stay here for another three years? Yes. There’s a lot of things I want to write about in the next three years. But
if you tell me I will be harassed ten times more, I don’t know if I will be still motivated. I want to feel excited every time I come to the office, feeling I’m lucky to have my job. If I’m not, I might leave. A lot of people want my job. If I want to leave, the paper probably will say yeah. In life, you go through circles. You go through periods when you are not so happy. The down period. I try not to be too fluctuated on emotions. Maybe that’s just my personality. I don’t get too positive. I don’t meet one person, thinking he’s great; and then think he’s terrible three days later. Maybe that’s part of my training. It’s also worrisome if you are not mentally stable.

The American culture is simple. Cow boys, Indians. The politics is interesting. America is a simple country. Then it got rich. Yes, America has Silicon Valley, Hollywood, maybe better movies. With the history, America didn’t create better food.

We think about what our colleagues do, our competitors do, who our editors are. Would Chinese journalists write better? Maybe. Maybe not. Foreign journalists bring in fresh perspectives. Maybe they are biased. Sometimes it’s good to have both insiders and outsiders. We shouldn’t be arrogant. But we are foreign journalists working for Western publications writing for a western audience. More is always better.

ZOU: One piece of advice?

BARBOZA: Work hard. What I tell you might be meaningless two years later. I could say follow the government. But who knows what will happen. Be fair, have good ethics. If you ask me how to learn about China, I will say don’t hang around foreigners. If you do, it’s us versus them. You miss a lot of things. Travel a lot. Study Chinese. Make friends with Chinese. That will give you a better way into China. Try integrating. To some extent, it’s the same for a white reporter to cover a black community. 80% of my
best sources are Chinese. I give much more weight to something said by a Chinese than a foreigner. You will have a different life experience. Learn from the locals. Pay attention to the details. I once asked a migrant worker how much he earned. He said 1500 yuan. That was good back then. But I didn’t know he works seven days and 14 hours a day. Then that’d bad salary. 80% to 90% of my friends are Chinese.

**Interview with Didi Tang**

Date recorded: October 21

Introduction: Didi Tang, 38, is an AP reporter based in Beijing since 2012. Tang is born and raised in Wuhan, China. She graduated from MSJ in 2000 and went on to work for Springfield News-Leader for eight years in Missouri. At the News-Leader, her investigative reporting about spending at Missouri State University played a role in the resignation of the school’s provost. She also won Missouri Press Association awards for her business coverage.

ZOU: Did you always know that you want to go back to China to work as a correspondent?

TANG: Yeah. That was the purpose why I came to the States in the first place. I knew. When I was applying for the journalism school, in my personal statement, that was my goal. It was almost impossible to get a job as a foreign correspondent as your first job out of school. You have to have some work experience first.

ZOU: Why you wanted to be a reporter in China?

TANG: At the time, as a Chinese, I thought I can probably write about China better than the foreigners who have come to China as outsider. I appreciate the perspectives outsiders can bring. But they can also use the perspective from an insider.
ZOU: How do see your role? You see yourself as an insider?

TANG: Half and half because I’ve been in the States long enough that I can also bring some of the perspective not that different from foreign journalists. But I do have the language advantage. I can read Chinese documents faster and more accurately. I did grow up in China. So some of the things, I think I can explain better than my foreign colleagues. Sometimes I think foreign journalists have a set of reactions to some things. If there’s anything that happens related to children, they will think it has something to do with one child policy. That’s not necessarily always the case. There was one time, we reported on a story about a young woman. She flushed down her newborn child. We had the story and we need to put it in context and somebody put in the line that this has something to do with one child policy. No, it’s not about one child policy. This woman is probably not married and she’s ashamed. And that time, it turned out I was correct. It has nothing to do with one child policy. Sometimes we have to make educated guess, but we have to make sure that guess is as good as possible. We also do stories about children smuggling. Yes, one child policy contributes to the issue. There are other complex factors involved with children smuggling as well. We should mention one child policy, but there are also the ignorance, money, profit all these factors that we should also put in the story. I think that’s what I can bring to the office. And my colleagues are open to it. In the office, me being the native, they would ask me what I think. The whole office, we look at them and we talk about it. We try to be accurate. Because at the end of the day, you want to be accurate and fair to China.

ZOU: So what’s your goal as a reporter?
TANG: I don’t have a complex goal. I just want to report. I want to write good stories about China.

ZOU: What do you think of the Western coverage?

TANG: I think it’s definitely getting better. AP has made this almost a requirement that you have to able to speak Chinese. Not everybody can speak Chinese. There’s a conscious effort. It does help when you can speak the language. Some organizations probably are not in the position to hire people who can speak the language. They hire news assistants. It’s not as good as being able to speak Chinese yourself. But they are trained, and they know how journalism works. Also, because of the interest in China, there’s lots of good literature that helps journalists to understand issues. The literature is out there for anyone who wants to get a sense of the discussions and debates in China. It’s hard to read China. But you do have a good number of experts. That has really helped journalists working in China to be better. Less prejudice, less biases I think. Another thing is journalists overall are well trained. They are professional. They try their best to be fair to China. It’s not an easy thing. But at least we are trying.

ZOU: You graduated in 2000? Has your view of journalism changed?

TANG: No. Journalism is pretty easy right? I’m not talking about the practice is easy. The concept is easy. Overall, it’s a straightforward profession. You go out, you get the facts and try to present it in a fair, objective and interesting way. That has always been the goal. You are probably told in your first class in journalism school. No matter how long, that’s the nature of the profession. That’s still something we strive to do, to make the story interesting, fair, accurate and objective, the cannons of journalism remain the
same. That’s still what we try to do. After so many years, the challenge is to make stories interesting without losing its depth.

ZOU: Has your view about the practice of journalism changed? Do you report differently at all?

TANG: Personally I don’t see any significant change in reporting practice. You may have some changes depending on the platform. One big change is probably the news cycle. Before you sort of have a deadline that you can work on. Now you are constantly writing stories. Because the pace has quickened, the Internet, you have to report very fast. But I don’t think there’s anything journalists cannot adjust to. There are other stories you need more time to work on.

ZOU: Do you see yourself as more of an observer? How would you describe your role?

TANG: Definitely an observer. I don’t know if I’m being old school of not. Our job is to observe, report, understand and present to our readers. Having said this, the choices of stories show what you care. I think most journalists know to pull back. You would cross the line if you over-advocate one thing over another. You go there, observe and report. The choices of your stories reflect your stands. You care about certain things. I care about China. But that doesn’t mean I do stories that are favorable to China.

ZOU: How has being Chinese affected you as a reporter?

TANG: Affect in what way?

ZOU: How your approach sources?

TANG: I don’t think it has anything to do with whether you are Chinese or not. You always approach them in the way that you think is most appropriate. If I see someone who’s American, of course I will speak English. If I’m asking someone on the street, it
makes no sense to not speak Chinese. Depending on sources, the ultimate goal is to get them to talk to you. Whatever makes them comfortable, you could be flexible. Sometimes you can be very friendly; sometimes you have to put your foot down, all within the framework of being ethical. Whatever works! Being a native Chinese gives me a lot of advantages. It works both ways. Sometimes it’s better to be a foreign journalist in China. To some people, there’s some element of trust with foreigners. For example, when we go to areas like Xinjiang, there’s a disadvantage of being a Han Chinese. It’s a bit difficult to win their trust in the very beginning. But as a professional journalist, I need to find a way to get them to trust me if I go to their neighborhoods. It doesn’t always work, but at least I will try. There are also times, and I will take advantage of it if it’s easier to be a Chinese right? Let’s go back to Xinjiang again. It’s easier for me to blend in into the Han Chinese neighborhoods. Of course I will say I work for the foreign media, still they feel comfortable talking to me. If I go to the rural areas, when they see someone who speaks their language, they are more likely to talk. You can joke with them. Again the purpose is to make people comfortable so you can get information and do your job right.

ZOU: What’s your biggest frustration here?

TANG: The biggest one is of course the lack of access, especially to government information. But I think things are improving. Ok, I’m looking at the positive sides. Compared to 2008, things have really improved a lot in terms of access. Yes, if you call local officials, probably nine out of ten time you don’t get an answer. But we always call to get some kind of confirmation. With China’s social media, I find it’s much easier to find people who are willing to talk. It has helped our reporting tremendously. For example, those mass incidents. Whenever there’s a protest or something. In the first
couple or several hours, the first day or first 24 hours, before we can get people on the ground, we can really get people on the ground to talk to us, witnesses or participants during those protests and interview them over the phone. And we have a pretty good reliable… We are comfortable to know those people, they are legit and real from the photos they posted and the information they shared. We can cross-examine our sources.

The government, that’s also improving I think. They have their official Weibo. I find a lot of times they release information in a relatively timely fashion. Yet on sensitive issues, that remains a challenge. The sensitive stories have been probably the biggest challenge.

You want to report. But your hands are tied. Sometimes you don’t know how reliable your information it is. We are talking about life and death. And you don’t want to put your reputation or AP’s reputation on the line to go out on the line to say this is what has happened. As a professional journalist, you have to make sure your information is right. But you cannot verify it. That’s probably my biggest frustration.

ZOU: How have you changed after reporting in both countries? How has your professional career affected you as a person? What you have learned about yourself.

Being in both countries have made you realize something?

TANG: One thing I sort of realized is that I am an ideologicistic person. I want to make things right. Social justice, I do care about those things. When I first came to the States, I was emotionally patriotic. When I first went to the U.S., I was very defensive about China. I didn’t want to hear people criticizing China. Learning in the U.S. has taught me how to be a critical thinker. And another thing is you have to face the facts and draw your conclusion from the facts. My professional training has taught me to respect the facts. We are talking about facts and we are talking about truth. For anyone who has been a
journalist for a while, you know truth is very illusive. Sometimes you may never know the truth. I don’t know if there’s a solution to that. You have to be conscious and get your information right, fact-wise.

ZOU: What advice you would give to foreign journalists?

TANG: I don’t know if it’s in my position to give them advice. Journalists who come to China are experienced. They have proved themselves in the field. Overall I don’t have major issues with foreign journalists in China. We are not perfect but we all try to understand what’s going on. Sometimes I even debate the importance of Chinese language. Of course I don’t think it’s right for a news organization where no one speaks Chinese. There are times, not speaking the language can be a blessing. But for a journalist, I’m hearing way too much noise. Lots of noise from the English world and the Chinese world. If you don’t speak the language, but you have a good attitude and curious eyes. You see things that people who have been in China for too long do not see. So I think it’s important to have mixed backgrounds. For people who don’t know Chinese, certain jobs, it’s not gonna fly. But for some kind of reporting, not all stories, I think it’s doable. And I think it’s interesting to see how they report. Of course there better be news assistants or editors to balance that out. Sometimes I just think it’s not that important. If you can manage that, I can see the benefits. I think there’s this anxiety among foreign journalists that they cannot speak Chinese. I can totally relate to that. But I started to see some of the work by journalists who don’t speak the language and they have some really interesting observations. I’m not recommending not to learn Chinese. But if you don’t, just relax. You might make some stupid mistakes. But if there are people who can check the details, you can still provide interesting things we don’t see. Also, there’s so much English
literature out there, it’s not like you don’t know anything. Also, maybe you pay more
attention to the physical actions. Sometimes I get too sucked up in verbal, I don’t get their
physical response.

ZOU: What’s your biggest fear?

TANG: My biggest fear? I think my biggest fear is the unpredictability of the Chinese
government. Are they gonna do something just because what we have reported? The
government is very capricious. You don’t know what their agenda is, if they are gonna
pull some punches against you just for some stupid things. Maybe one day you didn’t
cross your street properly, and they say look, you violated Chinese laws and regulations
or whatever it is, then you get expelled. Or for no reason, they may say we will not renew
your accreditation for the next year. I just don’t know. There’s no appeal process in
China. If they say that’s the final word, you don’t have any way to appeal it. At the end of
the year, we all kinda worry hey look are we gonna get our accreditation? Especially after
last year, what happened to the New York Times and the Bloomberg. You just don’t know.
You know David Barboza did the story. The government chose not to punish him, but his
college instead.

ZOU: Isn’t that typical in a way? Do you have any regrets?

TANG: I always wanted to come back and work as a foreign journalist. That was my goal.
Now I’ve done it. Sometimes I wonder if it’s a good choice. Now I have done it, maybe I
don’t appreciate it as much. Professionally there’s no regret coming back to China. But
you see the pollution. Sometimes you wonder if it’s worthwhile to sacrifice your health
for this. After living in the U.S., you know your life is more important than your
profession right? So I’m thinking about if I should stay here to be really good or there’s
other ways I can do what I want to do without compromising my health and my mental health. Dealing with the pollution. The pollution gets your depressed! I don’t go out to run as much as I do in the States. Without enough exercise, you get depressed! I’m trying to find balance between my life and work.

Interview with Sascha Matuszak

Date recorded: September 23

Introduction: Matuszak, 36, is a freelance writer based in Chengdu. His work has appeared on The Economist, Vice and so on. He has lived in China on and off for 12 years.

ZOU: What brought you to China in the first place?

MATUSZAK: In the beginning, my plan was to come here and stayed for a year and keep traveling in Asia. 9/11 happened. I arrived in August 28, 2000. So in 2001 when I was going to leave, 9/11 happened. I wasn’t planning on leaving anyway. I got stuck in China. I had friends, I learned the language faster than I thought I would. I had girlfriends. I was getting into the life. And also China was, still is, seeding with energy. So much energy here. Good energy, bad energy, so much energy. I ended up leaving anyway in 2001 and went back to the U.S. I was trying to set up a business importing English teachers to China. I had a good idea but I failed. I went back to China in 2003. I had enough money to invest in a bar in Chengdu. From 2002 to the end of 2005, I was trying to cash in the China business wave. I never did. Everything I did failed in terms of business. A lot of things led to me to make the decision to write. That’s what I love, so I should be doing that anyway. I was writing between 2003 and 2005 too. But I was also trying to do business. I consider myself a journalist, a writer first.

ZOU: How do you see your role?
MATUSZAK: The role is to… slices of life. What I do is to take little slices of life and show them to people, that help people understand China, that connect people, that help bridge a gap to foster empathy.

ZOU: Do you feel like an outsider?

MATUSZAK: Of course in many ways I’m an outsider. But as a journalist, I’m not. Almost every story I’ve written about, I’ve become part of the story. Gonzo journalism. It is something I came to naturally just by who I am and how I write. Its concept is becoming one with the story. I experience the story along with my subjects and I write from that standpoint.

ZOU: How do you see your role? Observer? Participant?

MATUSZAK: Both. Most of the time, I observe because I’m a laowai (foreigner). But I participate. I speak the language. I’ve lived with the people. I don’t live outside. I don’t live in a compound. Although there’s a big gulf between me and most Chinese people, I get Shaokao (barbecues) with people at night. I’m living it. I do it from experience. The best stories I’ve written are through experience.

ZOU: How has it changed you?

MATUSZAK: It has taken several years off my life. (Laugh.) The air? I’m not that different. There was a period of time between 2003 and 2005 when I was doing business; I tried to be Chinese in a way. I tried to communicate like Chinese do. I found it, in the business world, very repulsive. That left a mark on me. There’s certain ways of communicating I experienced. I try not to do it. I would compare it to doing drugs and not do drugs. It means the effects I had under the influence of living in China have a lasting influence on me. One of the main things I learned is the power of family. I learned
many bad things. But that’s the good thing I learned. The idea of consideration, like being considerate. Chinese people are not considerate to strangers. But when they are being considerate, they are extremely considerate. China is incredibly contradictory. There’s not a single thing you could say about China that in which the opposite didn’t also hold true. At first I thought that might be unique to China in some way. Then I realized it’s not. It’s unique to being human. Coming to China taught me that contradiction is part of who we are. We are all contradictory.

ZOU: Can you give me an example?

MATUSZAK: Simple things, Chinese are very fastidious about their own appearance. Being very clean about their personal space, but being very dirty in public space. A person who puts a newspaper down on anywhere he sits throws it away in the street. The kindness Chinese show to family, friends and foreigners, and the lack of consideration to strangers. The way Chinese think about history, they talk about the history but there’s nothing in the environment that could show you. The respect they have for the secret spiritual mountains, but they throw trash on it. In the U.S., you see the same contradiction. A free society where police can do anything they want; black people are put in jail for minor offenses.

ZOU: What you learned about yourself?

MATUSZAK: I’m adaptable. I’ve a lot more patience. If you can live in China for 15 years and not shoot yourself, I think you will have a lot of patience.

ZOU: What’s your biggest frustration?

MATUSZAK: My frustration has more to do with the business, not China. China is China. In terms of journalism, it’s still the best place to do it. But as a journalist, what
frustrates me is the low pay, and there are so many people who want to be in it. I used to
be paid 500 dollars for a story. I was getting back to that level. There was time I was paid
50 bucks. There are so many people writing. It’s hard to distinguish yourself. You now
have to be the writer, photographer, videographer, and web developer. You are asked to
do ten times more stuff, but you are paid ten times less. The good thing is I get to learn
cool things. But the hard thing is it’s hard to get your head above the water financially.
You just have to keep doing stuff.

ZOU: Has your view about journalism changed?

MATUSZAK: Not really. My method hasn’t changed that much either. I’ve always been
an experiential writer. I’m not the best reporter. So not much. I’ve gotten better at it. I’ve
gotten better at teasing out stories and write quickly. My views, my philosophy hasn’t
changed. As a writer, what you are doing is taking slices of life, little pieces into the
larger extremely complex pattern of life and shows them to people who’ve never seen
them. The goal is to foster empathy and communication. I do a lot sitting back observing
or actually participating. I think I’ve gotten better at the document reporting. Keep
digging and digging as far as you can to the most primary source that you can find.

ZOU: What you mean participating?

MATUSZAK: For example, I wrote a story about a fighter. Towards the end, I get drunk
with the people. I have lunch with them. I sleep in the same room with them. I talk with
them about the fights. I place myself on the border between fan, friend and journalist. It
allows me to write a certain type stories. A story what I feel very heartfelt, very real, as
close as what they would say if somebody asks them what the story is as possible.

ZOU: Is there a danger there for being close?
MATUSZAK: The only danger is pissing people off, losing friendships. Other than that, no. It depends on what you do. You are trying to get as close as to the truth as you possibly can that’s the point right, as long as you are doing that, everything is forgiven.

But if you start lying about the people you are hanging out with, or you start using the access they give you to portray them in a negative light. Nobody is that negative. Nobody is evil. As long as you keep it real. And real usually means balanced.

ZOU: What if you really like some of them?

MATUSZAK: I do.

ZOU: Does it affect your reporting?

MATUSZAK: It does. Yeah. It keeps you from talking about the bad things they do or the shitty person that they can be. And it keeps you from writing certain stories. If you like somebody, it can make it difficult. What I try to do is I try to show why I like this person and I try to show why other people might not like him. If I’m balanced like that, then I would not lose my friendship. I like him for A, B and C. But he’s known for X Y Z that other people hate. There are ways to phrase it. It’s got to be real. If I like the person, but I write about him in a positive light without revealing my personal bias, then I’m being fake. Whereas if I demonstrate that in a way, I demonstrate I myself like this person for these reasons. You got to be as honest as possible. That takes a lot of craft. How you put the story together; what you write first; what you write last; how you phrase this.

ZOU: What do you think of the Western coverage of China?

MATUSZAK: You know what, I don’t read as much anymore. I used to read a lot of it. The coverage I think is motivated by concerns and not by pursuit of the truth necessarily.
It’s not motivated by what motivates me necessarily. I’m motivated by revealing as much truth as possible in order to foster understanding. Some people are, I’m not sure what their motive is. I think their motivation is writing what will make an impact online. What will be talked about regardless of its use. Once you start talking like that, you start sounding like the Chinese. The media has a role for the public good. In a way, I agree. The Chinese government says that not because that’s what they believe, what they really believe is shut the fuck up. You are not gonna write about anything that we don’t like. I feel the public good is why I write journalism in the best circumstances. The Western coverage of China is getting much better. When I first started, there were a lot of people who sucked. And there were a couple guys who were awesome. Now the ratio is better. Now most people who write about China are knowledgeable. The age when people who knew nothing about China were writing about this place, that is kinda over. Now they know the place. They’ve been here for a long time. They speak the language. But at the same time, I think the coverage is motivated specially by dislike the Communist Party, by empathy with Tibet and Uighurs for example, by fear, by anger to the way China’s behaving overseas, with Japan, fear of economics, fearing of China’s alliance with Russia, the geopolitical bullshit. The China story is framed within that geopolitical reality. So trying to get out of that is difficult. I myself am angry with China a lot. I find China’s foreign policy to be just disingenuous. But I think the reason why Western’s coverage of China is so annoying is because America is worse when it comes to foreign policy. China might be sneaky, but at least they are not deadly. On one hand, I think America shouldn’t being talking shit about Tibet. Look what Americans’ done to the Indians. I personal find that argument “you stink too” to be really stupid. Also it’s
philosophically juvenile to do that. If I stink, I should wash myself. It has nothing to do
with how good or bad you smell. Anyway, I think the Western coverage is much more
informed than it used to be. Now you will see a lot of good analysis in major newspapers.
There’s a lot more native Chinese working within from journalists all the way down to
researchers and fact-checkers.

**Interview with Lara Farrar**

Date recorded: August 12

Introduction: Originally from Hot Springs, Arkansas, Farrar moved to Shanghai to work
as a journalist in 2008. Before that, she wrote for CNN International in London. She has
worked for other media outlets, including *The Boston Globe*, WBUR Boston, CNN
(domestic), *The New York Times* and *China Economic Review*. She, 31, now works
between Beijing and Shanghai, predominantly focusing her reporting on business and
technology in Asia. She holds a master's in Global Media and Communications from the
London School of Economics and studied the Chinese media industry at Fudan
University in Shanghai. ([Information from CNN](http://www.cnn.com))

ZOU: So my first question is what brought you here?

FARRAR: Yeah, so when I was. So I graduated from Boston University. And I studied
journalism there. And I knew from a very young age I wanted to be a journalist. And I, to
give you the long version of the short version, to give you the medium length version to
begin with. After I graduated from Boston University, I started working for a local media
in Boston, and I wasn’t quite satisfied, I guess, with what I was doing. Some of the work,
I loved. I was covering the Latin American population living in New England. I don’t
know why, but I always felt as a reporter, part of my role was to try to bring to light of
lives of people in shadows in society. Under-privileged groups, immigrants, migrant workers, who are perhaps not treated as well in other countries or just misunderstood. And so I focused on, you know, migrant issues, not on a whole lot, that was kind of my niche in Boston for Boston Globe, where I free-lanced. I also worked for a national public radio affiliated station WBUR, I was in charge of writing the mid-day international news cast. So when what’s going on in Iraqi, obviously, when a lot of us, the Iraq war, and just constant stories coming in every single day, the number of people killed, the U.S. troops killed and all these radical... All these jargonness linguistic stuff that I was having to rewrite from wire copy to make suitable for broadcast. Sitting in a newsroom when something’s happening thousands and thousands miles away and repeating these things over airwaves, but I was describing, obviously thousands of people would hear, driving in their car, sitting in their offices, whatever. I just sort of felt like, I wasn’t comfortable with that. Cause I couldn’t see the situation or understand the situation on the ground there in Iraq. I know the wire service serves a purpose, you know, because obviously not every news agency in the world can have a journalist everywhere in the world all the time. I just felt like I wanted more education. And I wasn’t exactly sure what I wanted to study. But I kind felt like there’s something I was curious about related to the media industry and technology. And I’ve know what. So I started looking for grants for programs, and I found one. It was actually exactly what I was looking for, which was global media and communications at the London School of Economics. Basically I was studying a lot of media theory and the impact of technology on media, on news, on journalism, everything. And I applied, and I got in. And so, in 2007, I went to London and the first week there in our sort of initiation, whatever you call it, this Chinese woman
spoke to my class. And she said, well, this year, we are launching a program to go study the media industry in China. I was in a two-year degree program. My first degree would’ve been from London School of Economics. My second degree would’ve been from the University of Southern California. When I heard something about media industry, China, I had this sort of weird instinct go off, saying life, hm, I bet that would be interesting, and I bet there aren’t many people in the West know about that right now. And of course China was increasingly in the news in 2007, the Olympics coming out, extra. But I was never interested in Asia, never interested in China, it wasn’t a part of the world where I ever saw myself going, except for maybe vacation. But it kept on, you know, I found out that I have the option to change from USC to China, and the question kept on nagging me and nagging me and nagging me and nagging me, and it became clearer and clearer that I had some sort of strong feeling in me that China would be a good move. So finally I talked to the people in LSC and changed, ended up a year later on Sept. 11, 2008, landing in Shanghai to study at Fudan University. So that’s how I got here basically. There were only about 7 or 8 of us. This was the first class ever to do this from London. And so I came here to start studying.

ZOU: That’s a good time to come. What surprised you most after living here for six, seven years?

FARRAR: Almost six years. I don’t know. I’m not sure there’s any surprise for me in China for me anymore. You know, in the beginning, it was, for me, dynamic, explosive, hard to understand, confusing. It was like trying to put together a gigantic puzzle and never being able to put it together. As a journalist, you are always trying to figure things
out, curiosity and whatnot. Trying to understand your story is really your goal. Can I tell you how I understand China more today?

ZOU: Yeah, please.

FARRAR: By yes and no, I don’t know. I think China for me is less about China, more about me and personal growth. And you know, I’ve gone from. I came here with one and leaving with another, which is that I’m pretty jaded by the media industry. I have many friends who are Chinese. And I have a hard time through telling the stories that I used to want to tell, or I guess that maybe people in the West had a custom of hearing about China. I think China is just what it is. And I think I can sound optimistic about the country or very bitter about the country. It’s not been easy here, for me. I’ve had tremendous amount of help from Chinese, and you know, that’s one thing I’m incredibly grateful for, which is the degree people had helped me. (I think my cat wants to be in the interview.) But at the same time I feel very bitter, I don’t think I’ve ever been a country before where the notion of foreigner and an outsider is so pronounced. That is something I think the end of the day why I will leave. It’s because the Chinese people see themselves as Chinese and I have a hard time, still to this day, finding people like who see it, see everybody just as human beings. And that’s one thing that really frustrates me about this place.

ZOU: You said you came with one ambition, and leave with another? What are your ambitions?

FARRAR: I came here very young.

ZOU: How old were you?
FARRAR: I was, I think, I was 24. I worked very hard on my career early on. And you know, I wanted to be with CNN; I wanted to be with BBC; I wanted, you know, you name it, big media agency and writing stories, even on air, or whatever. And I think the thing that China has done for me, and maybe I didn’t see it early on in my career, is it made me understand the story is always far more complex than what you see in the media. And I, through working for large mainstream media had been somewhat boiled down my stories to certain discourses, and to assume certain angles, to not really be able to delve deeper to what it really going on. In a country with 1.3 billion people, how can you? It’s very hard to generalize. And a lot of news analysis is very generalized I think. And really focused on certain groups of Chinese people, elites, perhaps, or people studied in the U.S., people who are willing to talk to the media, and for good reasons. But I think there’s a huge part of population that are underrepresented in the American media, and what their views are, you know, how they perceive life, their dreams, their goals, their worries. I think that’s the thing I’ve discovered, it may sound like cliché, but it’s easier said than done to come to a country and have a huge perception about a place and to leave the country, and say you know, all these stories we wrote, at the end of the day, are they really helping creating more divisions among people or they are helping us understanding each other more? I’m not sure the media is doing a good job helping people understand more. That’s not to say, the human rights story shouldn’t been told, the Internet censorship, the stories, the dissidents being detained, black jails in China, all of that. These are important stories. And they are important stories in any country. And in America, similar things happen, and the American public isn’t even aware of it. The media doesn’t cover it. I see a lot of hypocrisy in Western media coverage. I started to get
very frustrated by that. I think my ambition now is to be able to have a platform to tell long stories, meaningful stories, and to tell them from my perspective. Because I think there’s a type of journalism, and there are journalists out there who are well respected, they tell a viewpoint. And to pretend objectivity exists in journalism is for people who are very naïve because I don’t think the media can be totally objective. So if you accept that objectivity doesn’t exist, then to me, the next step is to say I’m gonna tell you how I see things. And if you like my view, the only thing that is real, that I can tell you is my experience and my perspective. Either you take it or leave it. At least you know it’s real because it’s coming from me. So I feel the power, journalism can be very powerful told from the first person perspective. So I’m leaving. It was very interesting when you watched me unpack, a lot of what I found is stories I printed out from some of the most famous long-form journalists ever existed. Gay Talese, Thompson, you know, there’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” the story on the Kentucky derby. That’s the work I want to do. In many ways, I’ve given up on mainstream journalism. Today I can’t tell superficial stories. I’m not criticizing, certainly not my colleagues. I’m certainly not criticizing journalism in itself. To be, it’s the industry and the business model. I think the bigger and better path that China has largely helped me to be aware of what’s next for me, in my journey as a journalist.

ZOU: You said you wanted to create a platform for long-form? What you mean by that? To start a new…?

FARRAR: No, no, no. I would like to have a platform, meaning work for media agencies enabling you to do that type of work. Or who knows, to write books, we will see, if I have the discipline to do that.
ZOU: What was your ambition when you came in? To work for international, big media agencies? That was it?
FARRAR: Yeah, definitely.

ZOU: And you said it’s not so much about China, it’s more about your personal growth. Can you expand on that? How have you changed after all these years?
FARRAR: I guess I’ve developed a more keen sense of, that’s not always there, cause I still do lose my temper sometimes. But compassion, compassion is a very important thing. Americans have certainly got a lot of criticism for their behaviors and whatnot especially two decades ago, the ugly Americans overseas. You know, there are a lot of things about Chinese that can be very very very very frustrating, especially for a single Western woman, perhaps. Or just foreigners sort of constantly bitch about the Chinese here at times. People can get very frustrated here. And to me, to be able to take a step back and not be frustrated, but instead, say, you know, maybe this behavior is coming from the fact that they have generations in their family who are still alive experienced death and famine. Someone once told me that for the Chinese, it was like they had a civil war yesterday, and which is true. You have to understand the collected memory of the history here. You know, in America, our civil war; I don’t have any ancestor still alive. You might, some people do. So trying to understand… I think, I think, I’ve been told this, may or may not be true. Some journalists came here hoping to report a revolution, hoping to see a democracy happen. You have to accept that’s probably not gonna happen, nor should you advocate for it. Journalists should not advocate for anything. I’ve developed a sense of compassion, trying to learn how to observe, rather than being affected. I have seen I think quite a bit of generational change, as a professor,
a teacher here journalism, by you know, I’ve taught grad students, undergrad students, had some experience with high school students. I’ve noticed gradually the difference between me and younger generations are becoming narrower and narrower, where I feel like, we just kind of see things eye to eye. When I first came here, it felt like there was tension. I mean, it felt like the students at Fudan who were maybe around my age or whatnot were out to prove how wrong America was and how misunderstood China was because of the 5000 years of history. You know, for me, it’s very frustrating when you try to, try to not understand people based upon a place where they are from and a government from which they live under. So I think in the beginning that was more of the case in terms of relationships with people. It’s not all their fault or my fault. I think both sides are sort of to blame. I saw China as one thing; they saw America as one thing. The interactions I have specifically with young people, or even certain older people are, there are certain people in China who are beginning to see beyond governments, and beyond political systems, beyond cultural beliefs and trying to understand both sides. I’m not sure that exists a lot in the past years. Maybe it could be purely me who’s starting to do that a lot more now, and feels more apparent. In the beginning, it was definitely very hard to feel you can truly relate to someone here. And now again it sounds cliché. I just see people are people everywhere. I think that’s one thing I’ve learned about by living in China. And I also, traveled extensively to other countries. You know, we all have the same problems, we all, the scale of the problem might be bigger or smaller, depending on where we are from, the level of development of our country. To report on stories when I know the exact same challenges and struggles happening from exactly where I’m from.

So I think at the end of the day, I’m kind feeling a bit lost what to write next as a reporter.
There’s breaking news, but then there’s stories about China. And I think the obsession, the media is obsessed trying to paint Chinese as the rare species, the Chinese this, the Chinese that, they are obsessed with this, they are obsessed with that. Whatever the story is, I think they tend to represent a small population. I think it’s more sensational. I don’t want to be part of the stories any more.

ZOU: If I ask you to use three words to describe your experience here, what words would you choose?


ZOU: What’s the most exhausting thing?

FARRAR: Well, I mean. Obviously, I think you know, I’m not fluent in Chinese. I can’t read Chinese. So that’s gonna make things tiring. You know, I think purely just really more day-to-day stuff, not being able to. Chinese live in a world that is just completely different than mine. You can pay for your electricity bill with your phone. You can, with a click of your button order this and that. I can’t live. I don’t have access. It’s even funny when I go back to America. They make fun of me. I forgot how convenient things are. Because everything for me is inconvenient in China. So every day-to-day thing is exhausting. Telling story is exhausting. Getting access to people. Always having to sort of weigh the cost-benefit of an interview. I don’t work on a whole lot of sensitive stories. Even a nocuous story can make someone scared to talk to me. Asking someone on the street what their favorite food is, can I have your name please? They will say no. Why are you scared of telling me your favorite food? Trying to get access is exhausting. As a foreign journalist, I have to deal with a lot of bureaucracy every year. Going to governmental offices for constantly renewal of press cards, visa. That’s exhausting. And
also, I really frankly think there is an energy here that is exhausting and I think it’s getting worse. I don’t know if I can put my finger on it exactly. But I feel like after, around the time of the Olympics, maybe for a couple years after, there’s a sense of optimism, growth. Just things seem to feel okay or good or energetic here. At least for me personally and I think many others as well, you may or may not know, many many journalists are leaving China now. I have friends in Beijing or Shanghai telling me they don’t have many friends here who were their longtime friends. And I think, when that starts to happen, you got to ask why. And I think it’s energetic, which may or may not make sense to you. But I think people are leaving because there’s something in the air where there’s a sense of kind of struggle here that is almost tangible. I think there’s more scarcity in this country. Whether, certainly there’s been food scandals quite a while now, but people are scared about their health, they are scared about what they are eating. And the survival fetus here. Whether the access to education for your child, whether be fighting to get a taxi, fighting to get through the subway queue, fighting to getting through the medical drug store, fighting to get into the hospital. I feel everyone here is fighting for something. There’s not a sense. Sure things may be okay. But I think a lot more people are maybe, you know, certainly Chinese can see tangible improvements in their lives in the past several decades. I think they maybe are getting to a point here that’s kind of leveling out, where the improvements aren’t so tangible anymore. Those who can manage to succeed or excel or go abroad for education or whatever obviously are those who have connections or financial where, there are fewer those who don’t. I feel like for me, there’s the exhaustion from this sort of collected energy of the country that drains me, makes tired. When I leave China. I don’t care what country it is. Certainly maybe
Afghanistan or Iraq might be different. If I go to India or Burma or Thailand, the energy is different. I don’t feel stressed or tired. As soon as I come back here, I just feel this draining, you know, for me personally there’s just something about the environment, I think, the resources, optimism, and whatnot about the future. Maybe not, especially, I don’t think people are not optimistic about the future here. But I think people are not sure what else is gonna change perhaps. And I just kind of, I feel like… It’s interesting, I mean. This is this cover story in *the Economist* a few months ago. Is the China dream over? or something along those lines. And I thought it was very fitting cause I can definitely tap into energy, certainly among foreigners. Almost every Chinese I know, granted these are educated Chinese, so I have to, you know, people who have gone to university, so my sample is not someone on the street. But everyone I know wants to try to leave and not want to come back necessarily. And I don’t think that’s, that’s happening.

ZOU: So are you, do you plan to leave?

FARRAR: Yeah, I think so. I think it would be hard. China is kind of being in a marriage. You keep threatening a divorce, okay we will keep sticking up for a few months. You say we will stick it out for a few months, then stick around for a few months. And it will be hard to leave. But when it comes,

ZOU: Why would it be hard?

FARRAR: It’s being an overwhelming experience. You have to understand I don’t really know how to live in America anymore. When I was home over Christmas, a friend made fun of me when I drove to a bank, I didn’t know how to, what I was doing. My life experience for obviously six years has been here. And I’m used to certain routine, certain
mode, or living and whatnot. I think it would be very sad. I think it would be very necessary for me to leave because I don’t want to be here forever. It’s not where I meant to be. I know in my heart I’m not meant to be here forever. But I know when the time is right, the time is right, I will know. Just like I know to come here, I will know when I’m supposed to leave. It will be hard.

ZOU: What will you miss the most?

FARRAR: (Pause.) Certainly it has been an adventure. I guess probably these moments of communication with people that... When you, and I, you know, try to communicate in broken Chinese, that’s good enough for them to understand me. To be able to talk to a taxi driver, or you know, the handyman in my apartment complex, or I don’t even know, what other example I can give you. It’s just to be able to communicate, or my aiyi, my maid. These rare moments where you are able to get a glimpse of their life via their language, not mine. When you can, when that, then translates into feeling your heart understanding and changes you, makes you more compassionate. Those are probably the things I will miss the most.

ZOU: What you won’t miss?

FARRAR: That’s pretty easy. Frankly I won’t miss the struggle for survival. That might sound very dramatic. But. Cause I had to travel a lot. Fighting to get on trains, you know, fighting, standing in taxi lines with 600 people in them. Flights that are delayed and getting in at 2 a.m. in the morning. Just the battle of getting around. That. I mean, I’m still young. I don’t think you can underestimate the toll that takes on you. I was just telling someone the other day. China is an environment where you are always in fight or flight mode. Your system, you are always to have to, it’s like an animal in the jungle
where you are either gonna be attacked when you have to fight back or you have to run away. As humans, we have the same response mechanism, and it leaves your system in a constant state of stress. Even today when I was walking around to get the vegetables, it’s a little stressful. I can’t. Sure, as a foreigner, I can’t understand, or not, even as a foreigner, with my poor Chinese skills, I can’t get to the grocery story. So basic things like that. It could be like that when I’m in Brazil or Israel where I don’t speak the language. But you know. Being scared of crossing the street, having to look directions every time I go outside. You know, just not being able to just do things. The transportation, the traffic. It’s just exhausting. I feel like my system, physically, just exhausted from that, I just cannot ever relax here. That’s something I won’t miss.

ZOU: What’s the most challenging thing working as a journalist in China? I know you mentioned some, like protecting sources.

FARRAR: So part of the challenge is partly my fault. I don’t read or speak Chinese. I certainly you know wouldn’t move to Latin America not be able to read and speak Spanish and try to get a job as a reporter. Chinese is a very hard language. There are foreign journalists here who do very well cause they speak and read Chinese. Unfortunately I didn’t realize I was gonna land in China. I had not studied Chinese. I studied Spanish. So partly it’s my problem. But then I also think another huge challenge is, when I worked as a reporter, a lot of what kept me so passionate about my work or even in other cities is that I spent a lot of time trying to become part of the life of my source. So I would spend, I would go to their homes. I would follow them around. I would be there. I worked with a photographer in Boston. And I remember he and I have the same mentality. I think he won a Pulitzer Prize or something. He’s just like, you
know, I will not leave the story until the very last minute. A lot of journalists will go home, and I will stay. Didn’t come till after. That was the way I always worked. And I could do that on my own and not have help. Here in China, I have to have someone with me, translating. Also China, it’s perhaps just Asian culture, Chinese culture. I can’t get access like that here. So having to constantly working through an intermediary, and more and more journalism is becoming where you are sitting at a desk, making phone calls and interviewing people, you don’t have the luxury to go in the field. And you take that away from me, and that is the main thing that drives me to be a reporter. Then there’s nothing left really. You can get a machine to do my job. And they are getting machines to do my job now more and more. So that’s the most challenging part. Yeah, sure, I got to see the lives of many Chinese. But I still feel like I’ve not gotten that humanity that I thought reporting in other country, in America and also other countries as well. Part of it might be the language barrier. I also think a lot of it is fear.

ZOU: Fear from?

FARRAR: From getting in trouble with the government.

ZOU: You said you wanted to be a journalist since when? Since the very beginning?

What interested you in journalism?

FARRAR: Since I was about ten. When I was young, I met a very. This is a very ironic story. I met a journalist in America named Conny Chan. She was on CBS Evening news or whatever. And I met her at where I’m from. She said to me, you have a very strong voice. You would be a great journalist. And of course at age ten, that matters. But I never let go of that dream actually since then. So that’s when I knew. I changed a lot. But I never changed my mind from that point.
ZOU: What you enjoyed most about being a journalist?

FARRAR: Getting to learn things. Leaning new things everyday, meeting new people everyday. I always tell my students, being a journalist is a privilege. It’s the best job in the world. It’s difficult. You don’t make a lot of money. It’s a privilege because people let you into their lives. You are the medium. You get to tell the rest of the world things. And you know, I think that’s a real privilege and a real gift.

ZOU: For you, how do you see your purpose working here in China personally and career-wise?

FARRAR: I think, I mean, in the beginning, it was career, meaning getting ahead of my career. There was a huge demand of news, a huge demand for news out of China. So you know, I went with it. And I kind of focused on a particular area which is the Internet, social media, tech companies, whatever, there weren’t a whole lot of reporters focusing on that, except for maybe trade publications and technology blogs or whatever. So really, it was just opportunity. And then it’s evolved, it’s evolved through... Then I think you know, there’s a saying among foreign journalists, you made government mad and you got kicked out, you’ve done a good job. I went through that phase. I went to write about censorships. I try to get into trouble. I did get in trouble, a little bit. Then I. now I’m in the third phase which is I want to write about my experience. I want to write about my friends, I want to write about people I met, my neighborhoods. Try to tell big stories about China. And it may not be very many, just a couple. But I want to do more. I want to leave here feeling whatever just a little bit to try to help mutual understanding. And if I can say I did that, that’s good enough for me.

ZOU: What’s your biggest fear now?
FARRAR: Getting a job in America. (Laugh.) I think.

ZOU: Seriously?

FARRAR: I think once you worked overseas. It would be hard to go back and cover domestic news. There’s a prestige and excitement about covering major world, major emerging super power. People certainly, back from where I’m from, kind of mesmerized by where I am and what I do. I’m not sure I can find something quite compared to. Maybe it’s my ego talking. Quite compared to that in the States, so I think, I don’t see myself going back and get a job in a newspaper in America. I mean, I might try to work for very local, small newspaper where I can make a huge difference. Even where I come from and my community in Arkansas, which is the South, you know, it might just be fun exercise to work for a small community newspaper for a year and try to do some groundbreaking reporting because I will have the opportunity to do that. Now if I work for *The New York Times*, not so sure, I will probably go cover crime in Brooklyn for a year, murders, whatever. I think, some stage in your life, you start to question where can I have the most impact, where can I have the best quality of life. So I’m thinking about maybe instead of being a small fish in Chinese pond and being a big fish in a small pond for a while and see what difference can I make at where am I from.

ZOU: How do you connect with your family and friends back home while you are here?

FARRAR: Well, my family, I talk to them on the phone. Just occasionally. My friend. Frankly I don’t have many friends left in the States; I have a few good friends. I guess the definition of a global citizen; my friends are really all over the world. Just you know, keep in touch with a few people. But people I know are really everywhere.
ZOU: Yeah. Is it hard to keep in touch with friends? From my experience, this time I went back home and found my friends getting married, having kids. And suddenly we are different. I don’t know is that’s something you’ve experienced?

FARRAR: Yeah. It’s very hard. It’s. My life and lives of the people I left are very very different. They have families, have homes. I’m living in an apartment with a 24-year-old Chinese guy and his cat and my cat. Right now all my possessions are in one room. So it’s very different. (Laugh.)

ZOU: Are you happy with where you are now?

FARRAR: Yeah, I think so. I’m not unhappy. I know things are progressing and changes are happening slowly. Just gotta hang in there and see what happens next.

ZOU: What matters most to you right now?

FARRAR: I think I know I have probably not that much time left in China, so I want to be brave and try to do projects that I’ve not done before. You know, what those projects are, I’m not exactly sure. Longer form of writing. And you know I have a huge portfolio from China and some of the stories I’m proud of. But a lot of them are… I want to walk out of here with some work I’m really proud of. That might take another year, or six months. Probably six months I figure. And then beyond that, have a home. Just a place that is mine. Like I said before, China makes you appreciate home. Cause here people are very appreciative of their homes. Many people’s homes changed a lot, but mine is still there. The hometown I grew up is changed, but not like here. I just want to have a home more and more.

ZOU: You mean, like to be stable?
FARRAR: Stable? Still, I still have that wide streak in me. I don’t think it’s gonna go away. Want to travel and work in different countries. I’m at a point I want to look back to where I came from and see how I can make a difference as a journalist there. My father told me: Everyone is running in one direction, you run in another direction. In 2007, sure a lot of people are running to China, but not a lot. My career took off here. There aren’t a lot of people who want to live in the American South, not a lot of educated journalists, and who, you know, who wanna work for the CNN or the New York Times. The American South is very poor, you know. Very conservative or whatever. It’s not New York City. But there are a lot of things to write about down there.

ZOU: Do you still feel? I wonder now you live in Shanghai. It’s an international city. When you move back, say back to the American South, that’s gonna be a huge change. Are you gonna be comfortable with that?

FARRAR: I think it will be okay. I think it will be okay. I think just as I came to China with very fresh eyes, I will go back there with very fresh eyes. I left when I was 18. So that was 12 years ago right, oh 13. So it’s a long time. I think it will be fine. I’m not really worried at all.

ZOU: Just now you were telling me how you were working through your things, your notes. You discovered stories you wrote before and how China has changed. Can you talk about what you mean? What you learned by just basically organizing things?

FARRAR: I don’t know if I can come up with too many concrete examples cause I was sort of just flipping through. But. What did I find? I think I found notes about, you know, the development of micro-blogs in China, social media. And I remember doing a story in 2009 for CNN about how there’s kind of an explosion of, you know, like Weibo, 5 or 6
of them, how some of them kept getting shut down, who are these companies, what is the
government doing to them, what was gonna happen with social media? Now it’s obvious
social media has exploded in China. It’s vastly. People don’t use social media when I first
got here. They use QQ, you know, or something different. Then now that really defines
peoples’ existence here in many ways. You know, it’s amazing to look back and think
about the questions you were asking them and the reality today. I don’t know. I can’t
name. I have to look through them again. Just about the emerging Chinese green tech
sector or how are Chinese consumers going to be, or you know, interviewing people in
Beijing whose houses were demolished. They were protesting, the nail houses, whatever.
I think they pretty much stopped that in Beijing and set more rights for these people. It’s
just, to me, it’s just interesting to see everything I covered. And to say, and to feel like
those stories were interesting to me at the time. And today I don’t even know what the
stories are really.
ZOU: You don’t remember it?
FARRAR: I don’t know what I would report on here. But maybe that’s life, you get tired
of a beat. They rotate. Internal rotate in a country a lot. Eventually you just get burned
out. You don’t see things fresh.
ZOU: Don’t know what else to write about? Okay. Because you’ve written a lot and you
don’t know what to write about. The news cycle is repeating, is that what you are saying?
FARRAR: I do think the news cycle is repeating in China sometimes.
ZOU: Like the same story come out?
FARRAR: Sometimes. A lot of the media attention. If it wasn’t towards Chinese
economy, or censorship, or human rights, a lot of it focused on sort of rich Chinese for a
while, you know, like dating website where people would pay tens of thousands of dollars to find a husband or a wife. Just a lot of it was just the ostentatious assumption of Chinese. That seems to be the coverage, and that kind of faded away. I don’t know. I’m really running out of things to write about. I know that sounds crazy, 1.3 billion people. I don’t know. I kind of. To me, the interesting story right now is China outside of China, China in Africa, China in Asia, geopolitical issues, access to resources, Chinese America, to me that’s the next. The next revolution in China? Obviously you can’t write about that. I don’t know, what would you write about China?

ZOU: I don’t know. You just mentioned some big topics, like censorship. That’s what I read from the New York Times or the Economist or other major publications. That’s what they cover. I don’t see many other stories.

FARRAR: Yeah, I think. I tried to surprise people, to show people the other side. Right now I’m just burned out. So.

ZOU: So I was, I went home, Chengdu is a major city in China right. After two weeks. I found it a bit boring. I wouldn’t want to go back home, even I love my home and I love Chengdu. I wonder if that thought crossed your mind when you go back home, it’s not as exciting? Because China is exciting.

FARRAR: Yeah, certainly it crossed my mind. Maybe I’m romanticizing. Maybe I went back for a month and wonder why the hell I come back here. I don’t think so. I think that for me, I have a very, a couple ideas what I want to do when I go back there. I don’t think it would be boring. I’m not sure I will be there forever. I might go abroad again. I’m just at the stage because of the pace, the stress of China. I think I need a break. I think I need,
I sort of, I might have China-PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder. I need to kind of go to rehab and recuperate a bit. It’s really exhausting here.

ZOU: A break from china, not a break from journalism? You still want to be a journalist?

FARRAR: Like I said, I want to do a different type of journalism. If you ever read “In Cold Blood” or watched the movie, “Capote,” that’s the direction I want to go. And I hope there’s gonna be money. I hope I can survive. I wanna be able to write stories every year and really really live and breathe something where I have resources. And I know it’s not a complete picture. I feel like the backstory is more valuable. And I hope there are people out there appreciate that. There’s audience appreciate that. That happening right now.

ZOU: Do you have any regrets?

FARRAR: Yeah, I do. I do. One of my biggest regrets is that I got a job at the China Daily. I did that. I had another job offer. Not my only offer, I did it because I wanted to basically try to write a book about the state media and understand the internal workings of state media. And instead of… Again going back to that theme of being able to observe with compassion, and not getting upset about a situation. I think I was too young then, and too sort of passionate about Western journalism to try to be an ethnographer in a sense, you know, to try to be part of something but also to observe it. So instead of really getting to know the Chinese journalists, instead of, you know, kinda biting my tongue and my anger about a story being censored or cancelled, whatever, I tended to get very emotional and didn’t use my time wisely. And I regret that. And then also after I taught journalism in Fudan to Chinese students. And I was very very busy. You know, I was not only working as a journalist. I was taking all kinds of side projects, try to earn extra
money. You know, PR projects. I feel I didn’t give my students enough time and I regret that. And I think you know, eventually, I think focus is very important and learning to focus on one thing at a time to do well. And just not worry about the future. The future will take care of it itself. That’s a huge lesson I learned. Right now I say I will leave China. I’m not really worried. I try not to worry about it too much. Just trying to focus on my time here and use it best cause I haven’t done that in the past. I regret it but I don’t regret it. Every experience, I learn something from it. But I do feel I could spend more time with the teaching and with working at China Daily. Especially the China Daily. I just got too emotional about the journalism ethics and whatnot, feeling frustrated there, as a Western reporter. Instead of feeling frustrated, I should’ve just gone with it. I probably would have more materials to work with afterwards to create a book or whatever.

ZOU: You were more like a planner? You were talking about “let life takes you” approach now. So what you were like before?

FARRAR: I think, I think I was scared. Meaning scared about my future constantly. You know, scared what’s gonna happen next. I have to constantly grab on things. Everything that comes my way, I didn’t say no, I say yes. And I think as I’ve gotten older. It’s hard that I learned things will always work out and you will know. I knew when it’s time to come to China. I’m starting to get the feeling it’s time to leave. You know, I’m not religious, but I believe that you, things will work out as they are supposed to and I should stop worrying so much. In the past, I worried a lot. Maybe if I would not just worry so much, things would have been easier for me.

ZOU: And you mentioned that moving out of your apartment in Shanghai, downtown area, was exhausting and emotional, what do you mean emotional?
FARRAR: Emotional in a sense that you know, I lived and worked out there for many years alone. I did teach at Fudan. But I had to stop teaching because I got in trouble with the government. And that broke my heart because I did have a connection with the students. We had dinner together. I will see them once or twice a week, meet for coffee. I had, loved being around students, or younger people. They are not much younger than I am. But it was really sort of the energy that kept me going. That was taken away from me out there. When that happened, it was a very hard thing for me. And when I left, I just, I don’t know how I coped and how I survived. I was in an apartment almost day in and day out by myself working alone. Had very little social interaction. Didn’t have, barely had any foreign friends, if I did, I barely saw them, and I just look back and I’m sort of amazed at how strong I was. And. Then also, you know, it’s the closing of a chapter of my life. I moved there in my mid-20’s, and you know, now I’m just in a different place. For me, that place represents a different side of me, somebody else. I’m not that person any more. So it’s kind of saying goodbye to that.

ZOU: What motivated you to go through all that hardship, being alone, working here?

FARRAR: I think, well, in the beginning, a lot of my reporting, I was out, so I may be alone. But I was out interacting with people everyday. I had a probably Chinese assistant with me. I was out interviewing people. So I had interactions. It was actually nice to come back at night and not to have to talk to anybody. But then my job sort of changed. Over the past couple years, for more and more, I’m sitting at home, calling people, or having an assistant who is in Shanghai, but not with me calling and doing interviews, you suddenly become very isolated. And social integrations aren’t there. The teaching at
Fudan was taken away from me. So you know, life just became very lonely there. And what was your question?

ZOU: I wondered what motivated you to continue working here, stay here?

FARRAR: Well, I think journalists. I think writing and journalism is by nature a lonely career. I can’t have someone with me on stories. I can’t have someone with me when I’m writing. I had a hard time when I was younger working in the newsroom, people around me when I tried to write. For me, it’s a very solitary act. So I felt like sometimes you have to be alone to immerse yourself in a story. And I stayed out there alone because there was a very Chinese neighborhood. And I wanted to try to assimilate as much as possible. But then it went from you know, trying to assimilate to wondering why I’m so mastitic. It become torture where you realize it’s important to have people around you. And I had some friends. But it just. My values change. I think when you get older; you want different things now.

ZOU: Who do you hang out with usually?

FARRAR: Well, before I was watching my students. I don’t socialize almost with any journalist here at all. I have a few friends. We will go out, you know, for dinner.

ZOU: Why not socialize with journalists?

FARRAR: I don’t know. I just kind, I just prefer to do my own thing. And also, my apartment was pretty far away from the city center. So if there’s an event in the city, and I’ve been working all day, I just don’t have the energy to have a two-hour commute back and forth.

ZOU: Is a circle, journalists circle here in Shanghai?

FARRAR: Yeah.
ZOU: Do you, are you part of it?

FARRAR: I know people. I think some people are more active than others. I think a lot of, not a lot, but a few core members left. I kind of don’t know what’s going on. I think about ten journalists around. And I know who they are. I just don’t make a big effort to be part of the community.

ZOU: Do it ever occurred to you that you wonder why don’t just go home? Anything like that happened, like you are just so frustrated with the situation. You know, working here, and you wanted to leave?

FARRAR: There’s never been a time when I really said why don’t I just leave. For a while, I was considering relocating to maybe Burma, to Myanmar for a while. But I kind of lost interest in that. It was just a short-term interest of mine. But like I said, I always know when the time is right. I will know. I never questioned that in my mind.

ZOU: No matter how difficult, how exhausting it is, you still carry on because it’s not time yet?

FARRAR: It’s not time, and also it builds character, personal strength. I don’t like to give up and quit very easily.

ZOU: Because I remember when I was in the States, sometimes I wonder why am I here. Why am I here? What’s my purpose being here? And sometimes it’s a difficult question to answer. You have to have a strong motivation to be here. You know exactly you want to stay. Cause it’s hard. And I’m just really... The reason why I do this project is because I’m really amazed as why journalists would stay here for years. Like you stay here for a year, two years, I understand. Yeah, it’s all fresh, and it seems interesting, exciting. But
after a couple years, I don’t know if you’d lose interest or get tired and just wanted to
leave.

FARRAR: I think, I’ve seen several types of journalists here. There are people who
genuinely love China. And their career is going to be defined by the fact that they know a
lot about the country and they speak Chinese. So they probably will be here forever. Then
I, on the other hand, I see some journalists scared to leave. There’s a degree of prestige of
being here among people in the West. Wow, you are in China. They’ve invested a lot of
time, life can be challenging, but it can get comfortable here. You know, the dollars is
still good here. You can kind of have, I can travel to Thailand. There’s a certain kind of
allure to it I suppose. I think they have become this collected mindset, I’ve actually
experienced it myself, if you want to say, I want to go back to America, I don’t
understand why people want to stay here for so long, there’s a bit hostility toward you at
times. I’ve talked about this to people who’ve been to Hong Kong and China. I think
people get into denial about getting back. Or, I don’t know, you can get, you can stagnate
in China in your career very easily and that’s part of the reason why I think it’s important
to leave. Because you can’t interview people, you can’t read documents, you can’t do
investigative journalism very easily, you can kind of get confined in sitting in a desk,
reading whatever Xinhua news agency reporting, and writing stories according to Xinhua
news agencies. And I’ve seen a number of journalists who are like that working for major
media, who rarely talk to real Chinese people on the street. They write about China based
on assumptions they have. Or they have discourses over and over again. And to me, they
start to waste away here. And one of the most valuable pieces of advice I ever got from a
journalist here is that China has about a five years cycle. That if you stay too long, you
start to lose your reporting skills, because you know how to operate. It’s like I am handicapped. Say my right arm is cut off and I don’t have an eye. I have a broken ankle. I can learn how to walk without an eye, an arm and a broken ankle. But I’m not operating in full capacity. In China, as journalists, sometimes you operate like a disabled person. You don’t have your full array of skills to draw upon. And you can get used to operating and walking with a crunch. How is that helping you in the long term? If I use a news assistant, if I don’t know how to research and read documents, if my media agency ask me to produce you know video content or I don’t know how to use social media in the West. And I can’t read social media here. Well then, what’s gonna happen to me, except that I will always be in China I suppose. But really you, to me, you got to be very, very aware of the fact that you may fall way behind here and you gotta make sure you give yourself a kick in the ass to go get out of here. Sure you can always come back. That’s my opinion. Things have changed since I worked there. I don’t know if I know how or if I remember the rules of reporting in America. If I can do a FOI request, I don’t even remember what I’m allowed to do in the States. That’s a bit scary because I’ve been here so long.

ZOU: Is that part of reason why you want to leave?

FARRAR: Yeah. Again, I don’t know if I will go back and work for a media agency. Nevertheless, I have to make sure my career is not stagnated here. Because I stay here for years and years and then years, and read *China Daily* and read Xinhua, and call up three experts on China, and write story after story, but where is that taking me in my career?

ZOU: If you go back, will you be working on any projects on China, or China is in the past?
FARRAR: I don’t know right now. I don’t know. You never know. I have a book idea, but I will not tell it to you. I have a book idea. I have to find out if I’m actually passionate about it and write about it. If I leave China, that would be it. It might be another chapter closed. And that’s okay. I will always have Chinese friends. That’s one thing you can’t replace. The connection you have here. That’s probably the best. Anyway.

ZOU: You kind of mentioned that, you scared of moving back?

FARRAR: Yeah, I think I’m scared of America. A lot of the news that I read about the country worries me. I don’t know why, I don’t know why, I don’t know why in a sense so many things that happen in America. What will continue to happen with our foreign policy and whatnot, just, then the political situation there is very very disturbing. I almost feel like if I go back to America, I want to work on fiction books because I really don’t want to deal with the reality, situation there. I want to get lost in my imagination and write my novel than having to deal with real situation. I’m not proud to be an American anymore.

ZOU: When I was in the United States, I read a lot of Chinese, like *Southern Weekly* to keep in touch with what’s happening in China. What do you do to stay in touch with what’s happening in the United States.

FARRAR: Honestly I don’t do a lot. Domestic news doesn’t interest me that much. I will read sort of the headlines, *the New York Times*, I will listen to NPR, National Public Radio when I’m working just to see what’s the stories are. I will ask my parents what’s going on. But domestic news, I haven’t really, I don’t really pay attention. I read headlines about China. I pay attention to what’s going on in China. America, I actually kinda don’t pay that much attention, to tell you the truth.
ZOU: Okay.

FARRAR: You tell me. What’s going in America? I don’t know.

**Interview with Chris Horton**

Introduction: Chris Horton founded GoKunming in spring 2005, primarily out of frustration with the lack of up-to-date practical online information about Kunming and Yunnan. Chris was the site's editor and main contributor until early 2012. Chris Horton is a freelance writer and editor based in Hong Kong. This interview is conducted through emails.

ZOU: When did you come to China? How old were you?

HORTON: I first came to China in 1998. I was 21 years old.

ZOU: What brought you to China?

HORTON: My first time in China was as a student in the Princeton in Beijing program in 1998. I attended it after completing a year of Chinese at the University of Kansas. I got into Chinese because a friend had convinced me and three other friends to enroll over beers at a party. I always thought I was going to end up in Latin America.

ZOU: Do you plan to leave China soon or sometime in the future?

HORTON: Well, I’m in Hong Kong, which is China for babies, much less challenging culturally speaking than the mainland, at least for a laowai. The biggest challenge here is paying the exorbitant rents. I’m not really the planning type, which is how I ended up in Kunming. When I moved here from Kunming it felt like I left China.

ZOU: Have you worked as a journalist before you came to China?
HORTON: I guess so. I was a reporter at the University Daily Kansan at the University of Kansas. My beat was music, illegal drugs and China.:

ZOU: Was working in China different than what you expected before you came?

HORTON: I first came to China as a student and then taught English and translated for a while. I didn’t start working in media in China until 2001, and it was mostly to escape teaching and translation. I had lived in China to know that there were limits on what could be discussed, but it didn’t really matter as I was doing things like restaurant reviews and lifestyle articles for a magazine called Shanghai Talk. I moved gradually toward business writing, and interviewed Daniel Mao, then CEO of Sina, right before Sina became the first Chinese internet company to turn a profit, and right before Mao married Hu Jintao’s daughter. My early experiences in China made me realize that in many ways the country at that time was similar to a startup. I started working on a monthly report on foreign investment across China and began to understand the scope of what was happening throughout the country. Eventually I ended up working for a while as editor of China Economic Review magazine, which also gave me greater perspective on the opportunities and challenges posed by China’s emergence from self-imposed isolation.

ZOU: What surprised you?

HORTON: My early years in China were filled with surprises, and actually they’ve never stopped coming. I was surprised by how safe I felt compared to the US, it was nice to live somewhere where nobody had guns! It’s a bigger and more diverse country than I think even 99 percent of Chinese realize. What surprised me about Chinese people was how open and friendly they were in my early years. I was also surprised by how different they
were from the image I had been given by Western media. On a similar note, I was surprised how good the food was, considering how bad most Chinese food in the US is.

ZOU: What’s your most unforgettable experience in China?

HORTON: This is impossible to answer, my time in China has been one unforgettable experience after another. Taking trains across the country and watching the landscape change are among my most cherished memories. Traveling around southwestern China, especially Yunnan, is a source of countless memories. I’ll always remember my first times arriving in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, as well as my trips to more rural areas like E’mei Shan, Tiger Leaping Gorge, cycling from Kunming to Dali and Kunming to the border with Vietnam. My favorite place to hang out in Kunming was bombed on Christmas Eve, 2008, which was memorable, but not in a nice way. More recently, seeing all the protests in Hong Kong, especially the Tiananmen vigil and 7/1 Democracy March has been especially unforgettable, partly because I became ‘mainlandized’ during 13 years on the mainland and couldn’t believe that such things could take place in the PRC. I’ve made many unforgettable friends from China and other countries during my time in the PRC, and I’ve also fallen in love here. I’ve spent my whole adulthood here, excluding three months in Cambodia and nine months in Thailand. I can’t imagine what my life would have been like if I’d never come here.

ZOU: What’s the most challenging thing working in China?

HORTON: Well, as a journalist, censorship and slow internet are obvious problems. So is China’s strict restrictions on journalists, who have to have special visas and must work for big media companies and deal with quite a bit of bureaucracy if they want to be legitimate. Most Chinese seem to think that foreign journalists are all spies, which is just
not true.

ZOU: What keeps you in China for so long?

HORTON: George W Bush becoming president and his ‘war on terror’ prevented me from moving back for eight years. My country changed dramatically while I was gone, and didn’t grow the way it should have, but rather allowed itself to be manipulated by a small group of politicians and corporations. Many Afghans, Iraqis and Americans died for no reason, and nobody has been punished. I frequently think of this as the American 6/4.

ZOU: How have you changed in terms of reporting, if any?

HORTON: I wasn’t very experienced as a journalist prior to arriving in China, so it’s hard to say. One thing I believe is that you can say anything in China, as long as you say it the right way.

ZOU: How have you changed in terms of how you approach and quote sources, if any?

HORTON: In China you quickly learn that you need to be careful when asking Chinese people about their opinions. What might be politically acceptable today could get an interviewee in serious trouble later on. It’s a major responsibility for anybody writing about China to not put their sources in danger, which is unfortunate. Also, it is hard to present the government’s view of things because it’s generally impossible to interview government officials, which is also unfortunate. I think there are many intelligent, well-intentioned people in the Chinese government, but their voices are not allowed to be heard, most of the time.

ZOU: How have you changed in terms of how you view journalism and the practice of journalism?
HORTON: Well, in the West, we’re taught that although journalism is a profession, it comes with a sense of duty to the public, while in China, it seems that journalism is primarily a vehicle for propaganda. During my time in China, I’ve developed a more yin-yang view of journalism in the two places (ie yang contains the seed of yin and vice versa). Despite what is said in the West or in China, there is much Western journalism that is propaganda for Western governments or corporations, while in China, there is an amazing amount of journalism being done by brave Chinese people who have a sense of civic duty that is as strong or stronger than the average Western journalist. These Chinese journalists don’t merely risk losing their jobs, they risk their personal freedom and safety.

ZOU: How do you see your purpose of working in China? (Personally or career-wise)

HORTON: On one level, it’s a job like any other, and one has to pay their bills. On another level, I hope that I’ve helped Americans and other Westerners understand how nuanced China is and how much of the Western media echo chamber about China and the Chinese people is not always correct. On the other hand, I hope I’ve shown Chinese people that Westerners and Americans are also not as simple as many of them think we are.

ZOU: How has your experience of working in China changed you?

HORTON: I have spent almost my entire adulthood in China, it’s difficult to say what changes came from living in China and which ones came from simply becoming older and wiser.

ZOU: What you will miss/not miss when you leave?

HORTON: I won’t know this until I’ve left, and I have no plans to do so at the moment.

ZOU: Any regrets? Things you wish you had done differently?
HORTON: No. I don’t live my life wishing I did things differently. I have made plenty of bad decisions and many great ones. What I hope for is that I never stop learning from my mistakes. That’s the fastest way to stop growing as a person.

ZOU: Use three words to describe your experience in China?

HORTON: Expect the unexpected.

ZOU: One advice for someone who wants to come to China to work as a journalist?

HORTON: Avoid living in a bubble – learn Chinese, make Chinese friends, avoid clinging to the comforts of the expat world.