

Reporting From China: 400 Reports, on 1.4 Billion People, in One Authoritarian State

Commentary

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My posting as *Al Jazeera's* correspondent in Beijing covered transformative years—from the run-up to the much anticipated 2008 Olympics to the post-Olympic period that saw the tightening of civil liberties and press freedom. The Chinese government's decision to try to control the message took a toll on the foreign press corps, and I recount the nuts and bolts of trying to run a television news operation in the country and my experiences with reporting interference in roiling, rollicking China. In doing so, I examine the government's uncomfortable relationship with the media, at times clumsy and incommensurate with its growing global status but also effective in controlling information. I discuss my own story, when the government expelled me from the country in 2012—an early clue that the media would become a greater diplomatic battleground. How China approaches its relationship to overseas journalists has a direct impact on how the country is viewed overseas. It is not clear whether Beijing fails to understand this or does not care.

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The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games straddled the five-year period of my posting in China as correspondent for the new 24-hour global news channel, *Al Jazeera English*. Looking back, the event served as a signpost: of the change, hope, and excitement in China ahead of the historic affair and of the subsequent denouement that saw the pivoting away from civil liberties and press freedom. But even in its most liberal moments, China tried to control the message along every step of the way—sometimes with flexibility but other times with an overbearing, authoritarian hand.

Television had its unique challenges. Unlike solo newspaper or radio reporters who could blend into city or village streets, the glaring gadgets and gear of a TV news crew meant creative subterfuge to stay one step ahead of officials opposed to free reporting.

For China—and for me—it was a brave new world, with a government seeking to navigate and decide whether and how to engage with foreign media. As an eager emerging power, it discovered with

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some annoyance that with such power came the reality of increased scrutiny by a curious world. In response, China sought to control the foreign press corps while simultaneously promoting its own country brand.

Al Jazeera English in China

Al Jazeera English launched on November 15, 2006, branding itself as the world's first English-language international news channel with headquarters in the Middle East. An offshoot of the Arabic-language *Al Jazeera* (also referred to as *Al Jazeera Arabic*), it is funded by the state of Qatar.

In the run-up to its launch and in the early days of its broadcast, editors sought to carve a space out for the channel as a global alternative, apart from its perceived competitors, BBC World News and CNN International. Newsroom discussion centered on the ambitious goal of reversing the flow of information from the developed world ("North to South") to a new paradigm where news and stories from the global South would reshape and inform viewers up North.¹

China, with its own ambitions and plans to expand China Central Television's English-language international news division, welcomed *Al Jazeera English* as a comrade-in-arms against the mediated Anglo-American and Western worldview. By *mediate*, I mean what reporters and media organizations do beyond reporting the facts when putting stories in context. Mediation is the framework through which news information is transmitted. For example, a foreign reporter's decision on a given day to write about a Chinese activist over so many other potential stories is an act of mediation. By making the choice to pursue that story, he or she places implicit value on human rights. With Beijing interested in upstaging mediation by the North, I got the sense from Chinese officials that they watched *Al Jazeera's* expansion closely as a possible blueprint to follow.

Al Jazeera Arabic already had a news bureau in Beijing. In 2006, *Al Jazeera English* opened its own office with former BBC correspondent Tony Cheng, Chinese national and producer Ling Pei, and Australian cameraman and video editor Mark Dobbin. I joined in January 2007, a few months after the channel launched. The early days of the bureau included friendly luncheons with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). They enthusiastically endorsed a channel they believed would provide a different, and therefore presumably friendlier, take on China.

Al Jazeera English may have given its staffers a mandate to tell stories from the perspective of the South, but there was no clear road map for how that should be achieved in China. To their credit, my editors left the details in the hands of its reporters. As a Chinese American born in Hong Kong and now working for a Middle Eastern news organization, I found the opportunity to cover China with no rubric exciting and promising.

¹ *Al Jazeera English's* interest and continued commitment to this concept include a weekly program launched in 2012 called "South2North" based out of Johannesburg.

In the early days, it wasn't even clear who we reported for, and for what purpose. At launch, the channel reached 80 million households, but who tuned in—who our viewers actually were—was anybody's guess. I put an unscientific placeholder in my mind that the average viewer was someone educated in the West, possibly living there but who might also be living in the developing world, a news junkie eager for more dynamic stories beyond the excellent, though poorly funded BBC World News. I also knew who my viewers were not: Chinese living on the mainland. *Al Jazeera English* did not have landing rights in the People's Republic of China.

Fluency in Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese was not an automatic equivalent to understanding China. Having only really ever known Hong Kong, I moved to Beijing, north of the Yangtze, as an outsider—but suddenly acting as a voice of authority on the subject in my role as a journalist. I had the medium—television news via *Al Jazeera English*, but becoming an expert and owning the beat would require building trust, as mentioned above, with an audience I could not readily identify.

My early attempts to approach China differently and in the context of a Western hegemony included how I covered the country's announcement of an 18% increase to its military budget in March 2007. My script pointed out that the United States spent more than 10 times what China spent and that new emerging powers, such as China but also India, were increasing military expenditure at the pace of their respective economic growth (Chan, 2007a).

On November 7, 2007, I had my first experience with reporting interference in China. Our news crew had arrived in Anhui Province to profile the life of a young village girl who lived alone while her migrant parents worked in the provincial capital, Hefei. I had naïvely believed the story was fairly benign.

Local officials stopped us and insisted that we head for the airport and leave. As part of our negotiations, we consented to having "tea," a euphemism for detention. Over our hour-long discussion, we learned that officials had meanwhile dragged the father of the child to the police station in Hefei for questioning. I immediately insisted that we be allowed to go to the police station, at which point officials stopped us by locking us into the premises. We rang MOFA in Beijing for help. After another three hours, we were allowed to leave with no explanation. Peter Ford of *The Christian Science Monitor* has said:

The problem with the local authorities [was that they] did not want anybody in Beijing to know there was something embarrassing happening on their patch. It wasn't that those authorities are worried about what people are going to read in Boston or Berlin or Timbuktu. They were worried that via Boston, Berlin, or Timbuktu—Beijing would find out about it. (Chinoy, Stubing, & Dube, 2015)

When I returned to Beijing, I reached out to the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC), an independent group formed by the foreign press corps that included a couple hundred members from 30-odd countries. I filed a report with them.

On December 28, 2007, the FCCC sent out a press release citing 180 incidents of reporting interference that year (personal communication, December 28, 2007).² The press release provided examples, including my experience in Anhui. In the summary, I had credited MOFA for helping our news team out of the situation. That did not appear to matter. On December 29, an official from MOFA called me and told me that the ministry had expected *Al Jazeera English* to behave differently from the BBC and CNN—but if that wasn't the case, our "special relationship" would end. The official also made vague threats about being less helpful in the future, possibly connected with providing additional journalist visas for overseas *Al Jazeera English* staff hoping to supplement our coverage of the upcoming Olympics.³

I cannot say with certainty what precisely riled MOFA about my contribution to the FCCC report. The MOFA official hung up before I had the chance to ask, and I suspect it was the official's deliberate intention to call on a Saturday morning, knowing I'd still be bleary-eyed and in bed. MOFA probably believed that we had had an understanding—that after MOFA helped our news crew out of a tough situation in Anhui, we would simply put the matter behind us. Instead, I talked about it. Even though I complimented MOFA in the report, it came across as a backhanded compliment, because while I didn't criticize MOFA, I did complain about my experience in Anhui and from MOFA's point of view, anything negative about China mattered. Ahead of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China could not be seen as a place that could not take care of its own children and where parents were compelled to make the hard choice of abandoning them to make ends meet (Chan, 2007b).⁴ But beyond that, MOFA wanted to show that reporting conditions in the country were improving, and my story did not support that narrative.

That finale topped off my first year of reporting in China. My coverage had run the gamut: from stories inside the country's factories to its space program, from the Shanghai Stock Exchange's surprising tailspin in the spring to the annual National People's Congress. I was learning on the go, and I learned just how surprised China was by—and uncomfortable with—being mediated by others. Beijing had sought to host the Olympics in part to use it as a symbolic coming-out party—to step on to the stage as a new global player. But while the world eagerly watched this change, the world also scrutinized. What its leaders forgot was that the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, its propaganda department, had far less impact beyond its borders.

² From the Foreign Correspondents Club of China press release: "'Reporting interference' includes violence, destruction of journalistic materials, detention, harassment of sources and staff, interception of communications, denial of access to public areas, being questioned in an intimidating manner by authorities, being reprimanded officially, being followed, and being subjected to other obstacles not in keeping with international practices."

³ The government did grant *Al Jazeera English* applications for visas to report on the Olympic Games.

⁴ In my report, 12-year-old Xie Xiang Ling laments, "I take care of myself. Sometimes, they come home on weekends, sometimes they don't come home for a month. I call them and ask them to come back home."

The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games

Despite my first negative reporting experience in China and the FCCC's early January 2008 press freedom summary, I had actually arrived in China during a period when it was making strides in press freedom—at least for the foreign press corps (the censors still had control over most domestic news organizations).

Two years before the Olympics and in an effort to allay the International Olympic Committee's concerns about press freedom in China, the country had relaxed its reporting rules for foreign correspondents. Reporters would no longer need to ask for permission to travel outside the capital. Many media organizations had been rushing to set up new or temporary bureaus in Beijing at the time, and the FCCC had projected that in the weeks before the Games, some 20,000 foreign journalists would come to the city (personal communication, December 27, 2007). The decision, therefore, was welcomed, including by Andrew Browne of *The Wall Street Journal*:

From a reporting point of view we were told that the Olympics [were going to] be the turning event for us—that we would have freedom then—complete freedom to travel around the country. China was opening and it was opening to us as foreign reporters. (Chinoy et al., 2015)

The only exception to that regulation remained Tibet. That became an important restriction when riots broke out in Lhasa in March 2008. With limited information, the foreign press corps could only guess at the riots' damage and scope. In this vacuum, media reports arguably sketched out a story more sympathetic to Tibetans, where more transparency might have actually worked in China's favor. The only foreign correspondent to witness the unrest, James Miles of *The Economist*, supported Chinese state media's accounts of targeted ethnic violence by Tibetans against Chinese, also reporting that Chinese security forces stayed their hand, sacrificing "the livelihoods of many, many ethnic Han Chinese in the city for the sake of letting the rioters vent their anger" (Miles, 2008, para. 9). The event tested the Chinese government's ability to manage the message and convince a skeptical global audience that the situation would not impact the Olympics.

The consensus among foreign reporters was that under the news rules, things were much improved—but could be better. Louisa Lim of NPR News ran into similar problems as I did in the countryside:

We all wanted to test the rules to see whether there'd be a change. And so we all trotted out to the countryside bearing our copies of the regulations printed out to discover that although the regulations were there on paper, on the ground there was still this extreme reluctance by local officials to allow you to interview people. (Chinoy et al., 2015)

Generally, though, my experience that first year reflected that new freedom, even if conditions did not yet meet, as the FCCC described it, "international standards and criteria" (personal communication, April 28, 2008).

Unexpectedly, the story where reporters experienced the greatest freedom was the biggest China story of 2008—and it was not the Olympic Games, as everyone had anticipated. On May 12, a magnitude 7.9 earthquake hit Sichuan Province, killing some 70,000 people. The chaos of the natural disaster in the initial days meant officials really did not—perhaps could not—stop the surge of reporters making their way to the disaster zone. It was beyond authorities' control. Once Beijing had a chance to assess the situation, it appeared that the central government opted to stick to the free-for-all media strategy—at least for one remarkable month. Lim was astounded by the freedom:

In a way it was the most exciting time that I was in China as a journalist. It was the only time where I felt I was working alongside Chinese colleagues and we were working together. . . . Suddenly, there was this little window as to what reporting in China might have been like—without all that harassment. (Chinoy et al., 2015)

One incident of reporting interference stands out from the blur of those sleepless days and nights covering the tragedy. Police officers would not let us hike down to the destroyed county town of Beichuan. According to local reports, half the population of 20,000 had died, and our crew, along with a gaggle of other reporters, could not convince officials to give us access to Beichuan, which sat at the base of a steep valley ("Beichuan county town," 2008). We argued with them for what felt like hours (Chan, 2008a). We called MOFA. In the end, the officers simply gave up and let everyone trek down.

When our team arrived at the bottom of the valley, we found the town deserted, with no People's Liberation Army soldiers or rescue workers in sight. It wasn't until later that we learned that officials had received orders not to let anyone down for fear of a dam bursting upstream, which would have flooded the entire city—drowning everyone at the bottom. In a country whose officials constantly blocked reporters' access and repeatedly lied to media, we could not accept officials on their word the one time they tried to stop us from going somewhere for our own personal safety.

Chinese superstition would say that the timing of the earthquake, just months ahead of the Olympic Opening Ceremony, was a bad omen for the country's rulers. But the event went off without a hitch. China won more gold medals than any other country (51!), beating the United States and Russia (ESPN, 2008). It had been an expensive coming-out party, costing an estimated US\$40 billion, but the pricy play worked (Rabinovitch, 2008). It was a success for people around the world who oohed and aahed over the Opening Ceremony, gasped at surprise wins on the track, and marveled at athletes' feats. As with most Olympic Games, the host city pulled off a great Games, despite negative news coverage in the run-up. For China, it was a soft power win.

The general sense of friendship and goodwill during the Olympic period did not comport with some foreign media's experiences. Ahead of the Games, protests along the torch relay route had surprised Chinese citizens, many of whom were unaware of negative overseas views of their country. Resentment against Western media organizations grew and did not necessarily abate during the Games. An e-mail from the FCCC days before the Closing Ceremony reported more than 30 cases of reporting interference, including 10 cases of violence and 8 cases of damage to equipment or destruction of video/photos (personal communication, August 21, 2008).

In taking stock of how *Al Jazeera English* and other media groups experienced and covered the Games and that year in China, I wonder how close we came to getting the overall picture right—or how far we strayed from it as journalists because we naturally seek out fault lines. Headlines ricocheted from the earthquake, to Tibet, to human rights. But reporters also covered the excitement and pride most Chinese felt about hosting the Games. Global audiences had the opportunity to see dual, sometimes competing representations of China and the Olympics, first from China and then from their own countries' reporters. China's message, carefully constructed and crafted, was consistent. The Olympic Games provided a forum to observe how state propaganda pitched its message against the disparate cacophony of individual reporters and news sources around the world.

The Olympic Hangover

After great uncertainty, on October 17, 2008, China confirmed that the Olympic-period reporting regulations would become permanent rules for foreign reporters in the country ("China's Reporting Rules," 2008). It was good news—none of us had been sure how the government would swing, one way or the other, until the announcement. I filed a video report on the decision that evening, explaining to viewers that newsgathering in China had been and would continue to be a challenge, but "still, in our travels around China, it has helped to know that the law, at least, was on our side" (Chan, 2008b).

I had hopes the move might improve reporting conditions. But the opposite happened: Slowly, almost indiscernibly, covering China became more difficult for our news crew. At first, I didn't even catch the change. But we were spending more time planning our travel and logistics in order to evade local officials or thugs because of the growing frequency of reporting interference. The thugs would tail us, intimidate us or those we sought to interview, or even physically stop us from going places. Hired from the local population, they did not wear uniforms and never identified themselves, serving as proxy amateur police. Officials who showed up later would look blankly and innocently while we complained about the mysterious men in black running amok around their county. The cadres would then offer to "help," only to frustrate us in bureaucratic red tape and endless rounds of meetings instead—an effective ploy for any news team on deadline.

We experienced reporting interference even while covering stories we didn't consider terribly negative or sensitive, including ones on the economy or manufacturing. Often, I had the feeling local officials stopped us out of fear we were investigating some other malfeasance of which we were unaware.

For a TV news crew, avoiding attention required creativity. We traveled with eight or nine pieces of excess baggage—a hodgepodge of lights, extra lenses, transmission equipment, sound equipment, and a tripod. To maintain high production value for the channel, we tried our best not to work with smaller, less professional-quality cameras even if they were more convenient. Although I was ethnic Chinese, the rest of the team often included at least one non-Asian, which meant that camouflage in a Chinese town or village was impossible. No matter how remote a location, we often had a two-hour window to film material before—like clockwork—a local party cadre or someone representing him or her would show up in a black Audi to ask questions.

Once anyone arrived, it was pretty much game over. People who had agreed to speak to us often still wished to, but not under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. Sometimes their association with our team meant significant trouble or even danger—everything from a visit to the local police station, to short-term detention, to physical harassment. The stakes were high—both to protect our sources and to make sure we returned to Beijing with enough material to edit a video report.⁵

To avoid any confrontation, we would often arrive at our interview location just before dawn, calculating that at that hour, cadres were in bed and would take extra time to show up after being tipped off. It was a cat-and-mouse game. Hotels were required to let local authorities know about any foreign guests, which often meant we'd overnight a few cities away from the target story or fly into the second-nearest airport to throw snoops off our scent. Sometimes that didn't work: On one trip to Xinjiang, China's westernmost territory bordering Pakistan, two carloads full of men tailed us over nine days and across three cities. We could not interview a single Uighur without compromising him or her.⁶ By that time, the online social media website Twitter had become popular with many foreign reporters in China, and I would often post tweets and photos, real-time play-by-plays, of our encounters with officials or non-uniformed thugs. In those moments, I shared my field reporting experiences as much to inform people as to protect myself. The thought occurred to me that in the case of a serious detention or danger—where the team was, what we were doing, and when—would be public information that my peers or even my editors would find helpful.

I was not alone in my assessment that our work had become more difficult. On August 6, 2009, the FCCC issued a statement on reporting conditions one year after the Olympics. "FCCC members report increased intimidation of sources and domestic staff, a trend that threatens progress toward greater openness," the release read. The e-mail went on to tally 16 incidents of violence against reporters, 100 incidents of being turned away from public spaces, and 75 cases of being followed (personal communication, August 6, 2009).

If I had to pinpoint one moment when I personally and definitively felt the country's swing away from liberalization, it was in July 2009 in the offices of Gongmeng Law Center, otherwise known as the Open Constitution Initiative, an organization of lawyers and academics who fought for greater rule of law in the country. Prominent rights attorney and activist Teng Biao of the University of Politics and Law in Beijing was a founder. In 2011, he would be arrested and jailed. Xu Zhiyong, another attorney and

⁵ Our team had three things we made clear to all our sources ahead of interviews: (1) Our report would not likely benefit their situation and could even harm their interests if party officials learned they were speaking to foreign media; (2) our position as foreign reporters did not and could not protect them in the event of harassment from officials or thugs, though we'd try to the best of our ability to help; and (3) viewers watching any report outside of China would also be unlikely to help. Often, and to my surprise, people still accepted our interviews. I think and suspect that it's psychologically important for those who have been voiceless and powerless to find a voice, and that our reports served almost as a record and existential acknowledgment of their injustice or grievance.

⁶ Uighurs are an ethnic minority group in the country with an often tense relationship with its Chinese rulers.

founder, is currently in jail.⁷ But on that day back in 2009, both men were still free. I had shown up at the office to interview Teng about some of the work he was doing. Instead, we found him distracted, forlorn, and a little lost standing in an empty office. Authorities had shown up and cleared the place out under the pretext of launching a tax evasion investigation. Civil society groups were feeling the pressure in a way they had not for a few years. Over the last few months, Teng Biao told me, "I'm guessing about 70% of rights attorneys have been harassed." In my news report, I said:

Officials have decided on a heavy-handed strategy to deal with rights lawyers and NGOs. The assault on these institutions means that after the dust settles, if the government succeeds—there may well be no one left to fight for the public interest. (Chan, 2009b)

During those months, I questioned the sincerity of the government's liberalization before the Olympics given its about-face so soon after the end of the Games. Had the Foreign Ministry and other officials gritted their teeth all the while, giving in to International Olympic Committee demands in order to ensure a smooth, drama-free event, but inwardly detesting the concessions? President Hu Jintao was still in charge at this point—this was before Xi Jinping's period of increased authoritarianism and his campaign against civil society and rights. At the very least, the pulling back reflected the feeling in some quarters of the party that the Olympics had allowed for too much political relaxation.

I do not believe Teng Biao and other civil society activists grew bolder ahead of the Games. They carried on with their work with no sharp deviations between 2008 and 2009. Instead, the system changed. Beijing decided to move the goal posts after the Olympics. It rewrote the rules and did not inform anyone. And they did so, I believe, intentionally. Obfuscation and uncertainty are effective ways to exert power over people. The only way for members of civil society or for foreign reporters to learn where the new lines were drawn was empirically—through experience. Often the outcomes from these trial-and-error efforts were in neither activists' nor reporters' favor.

For the country's rights activists, inadvertently stepping over the line had serious consequences. Many people I interviewed are now in or have been in jail. They include: Teng Biao, detained for two months in 2011; Xu Zhiyong, presently in jail; rights attorney Pu Zhiqiang, detained and in custody since May 2014; artist Ai Weiwei, held for three months; and Ilham Tohti, an Uighur scholar with a life sentence.⁸

As mere witnesses to the changes, foreign reporters faced far smaller consequences for our infractions. But the constant battling and hustling our way out of situations wore on many of us. There was the car chase during our investigation of a family planning unit in Hunan that had kidnapped children to sell to adoption centers. There was the chaos of the land grab protest in Zhejiang Province. There were the Beijing-based plainclothes surveillance men I noticed, who would occasionally follow me around on my weekend days off. By the time 2012 rolled around, I was very much ready to leave.

⁷ As of November 2015.

⁸ As of November 2015.

The Departure

Unfortunately, I did not leave China on my own terms. The government expelled me. After five years, my time in China ended in the most unexpected and dramatic manner.

My first clue there was a problem came while I was vacationing in London in November 2011. Before departing Beijing, I had started the annual process of renewing my press credentials and J-1 visa. I had already done this four times for every year I had spent in China. The first step was always to apply for a new press card at MOFA. I had submitted the form before the start of my trip, and the bureau's office manager had plans to pick up the card one week later. Instead, she interrupted my trip in London to inform me something was wrong. The press center claimed the card was not ready. MOFA then asked to meet me, but since I was out of the country, *Al Jazeera Arabic's* bureau chief, Ezzat Shahrour, took the meeting instead. MOFA, it turned out, was upset that *Al Jazeera English* had aired a documentary on slave labor in Chinese prisons. I had no part in producing that story. An independent team based in London had worked on the story and had primarily relied on interviews outside China as their main sources. That didn't matter. MOFA intended to create a link between the airing of the documentary and my press credential.

The uncertainty lasted a month, but on December 22, 2011, I finally received my new press card, with one big catch: Instead of credentials for the next year, the expiry date for the card read February 29, 2012. I would have to repeat the entire application process in a few weeks. The matter was not finished.

The FCCC, which I approached on the matter, could not remember an instance when a resident foreign reporter received a short-term press credential in that manner. The ploy appeared to be a new one, and it was tough trying to decide how best to move forward. Efforts over the subsequent two months, sometimes with calls to MOFA, but also attempts by *Al Jazeera's* management in Doha to engage, produced limited results. MOFA handed out a one-month press credential to me at the end of February.

March is always a busy month in China because of the annual National People's Congress. MOFA had put me on a tight leash, but our team carried on filing reports. The biggest buzz that month was the expected overhaul of the country's Criminal Procedure Law. I headed out one morning to interview rights attorney Pu Zhiqiang about the impending new law. At Pu's law offices, plainclothes national security officers showed up and stopped our interview. As I argued with them, I started recording the exchange with the iPhone in my pocket. In the end, our news crew left without the interview with Pu. Frustrated by the entire charade, I transcribed and translated my conversation with the unidentified men and published it on *Al Jazeera English's* website (Chan, 2012a). I tweeted out the link.

On March 12, I filed a report on "black jails." It was a follow-up story to my 2009 investigation of these extralegal detention centers in Beijing. In my original story, I caught on tape a woman screaming and pleading for help as the door to one of the facilities shut in my face (Chan, 2009a). My fluency in Chinese maximized the television drama, allowing me to provide simultaneous translation to the cameras of the events happening around me. Three years after my first investigation, I wanted to highlight the problem that had continued despite government claims that it had closed illegal detention centers in the

capital (Chan, 2012b). The discovery of more black jails at a time when the central government unveiled the new Criminal Procedure Law revealed the gulf between published laws and the reality on the ground. In the back of my mind, I wondered whether doubling down on human rights stories while on a one-month press visa was the best idea. The answer was no.

On the day of my visa expiry, I rang MOFA and asked whether I would receive new credentials. I was told I would not. I asked whether I should outstay my visa in the hopes of a delayed resolution. The woman at the other end of the line cryptically told me, "You know what to do." After checking in with my editors at headquarters, we decided that outstaying my visa only to face possible detention was too risky, so I grabbed my bag and headed to the airport for Hong Kong.

From a legal perspective, authorities had simply allowed my visa to lapse. De facto, I was the first foreign reporter in 14 years they had pushed out with this strategy (Wines, 2012). *Al Jazeera English* had the choice to describe the incident in multiple ways or not at all. In May, the channel decided to move forward and publicly label it an "expulsion," declaring the bureau effectively closed with my departure (personal communication, May 7, 2012).⁹ Chinese officials, who had such high hopes over the launch of a South-to-North-oriented news channel, reacted sharply. By now, Chinese officials targeted both *Al Jazeera English* and me. In one missive printed just days after the public disclosure of my departure, state media paper *Global Times* pinned the fault squarely on me: "Melissa Chan holds an aggressive political stance. . . . She has produced some programs which are intolerable for China" (Shan, 2012, para. 3). In doing so, officials actually laid the groundwork for an eventual rapprochement between the two institutions, the Chinese government and *Al Jazeera English*, by cutting out and isolating the individual troublemaker from the picture.

The departure brought my own 15 minutes of fame. I believe Chinese officials had believed I would leave quietly. But I did not because I would not—and it was also simply not feasible, considering the farewells and accompanying explanations I had to provide my friends, many of whom were journalists and outraged that I had been censored. News wires and major Western publications carried the story. In my hometown of Hong Kong, the story carried the day.

China has never provided a clear explanation for my expulsion. Officials accused me of breaking the law, though they never specified which laws. In one conversation with *Al Jazeera English* management, officials apparently brought up a conflict I had with the People's Armed Police during the Olympics (personal communication, 2012). That allegation holds little water—the transgression would have taken place in 2008, and officials could not explain why they waited until 2012, five years later, to take action. They told one American diplomat that I was an "aggressive reporter." They said the same to a group of Scandinavian diplomats and reporters, admonishing them not to be like me. The character assassination campaign continued at an embassy luncheon in Washington, DC, and to another journalist who happened to be a friend of mine (personal communication, 2013). Even after *Al Jazeera English* eventually reopened its bureau in China, new staff members there were reminded of my unidentified

⁹ Local staff remained on payroll, and when the bureau reopened with the arrival of *Al Jazeera English* correspondent Adrian Brown in early 2014, staff maintained and continued their positions.

crimes (personal communication, September 2014).

Unless I can one day walk down the halls of MOFA and pull out my dossier, there are few ways of ever really knowing the calculus that went into China's decision about me. This is a dissatisfactory and necessarily ambiguous answer, but it cannot be helped. My own best guess is that a combination of factors led to my expulsion. It was an opportunity for the government to send a message to the rest of the foreign press corps by making an example out of me, much like the Chinese proverb to "kill the chickens and scare the monkeys." I was the proverbial chicken. Maybe after a break of 14 years, some conservative officials felt that the foreign press corps had developed too much leeway and believed that the expulsion would send a warning to others and encourage self-censorship.

Race may have played a factor. Officials may have felt more comfortable ejecting an ethnic Chinese, whom they somehow felt more ownership over due to misperceptions of the hierarchy of loyalty from the Chinese global diaspora. Chinese American (and Chinese Canadian) journalists have discussed how officials hold us to a different standard—almost as if we are Chinese citizens—for any critical reports perceived as traitorous against the motherland. In conversations with MOFA over the years, I would often get the rebuke that I should know better "as a Chinese" than to make China look bad.

As I tried to understand my own expulsion back in 2012, one source of mine informed me that the decision involved not just MOFA but the propaganda department and the Ministry of Public Security. If true, MOFA, often viewed as one of the weakest yet more liberal ministries in China, probably had no choice in a three-way decision involving two of the more conservative divisions of the government.

Targeting a journalist in my position also made strategic sense: I was an American working for a Middle Eastern news organization. The Foreign Ministry and other departments involved could show they had flexed their muscles by ejecting an American—yet did not have to worry about taking on an established, American news organization such as CNN, which would have created bigger waves and diplomatic headaches. Additionally, *Al Jazeera English*, itself a fairly new media organization, had few senior editors with knowledge on how to most effectively engage with Chinese diplomats. The channel had no bureau chief in Beijing, although *Al Jazeera Arabic* did. But the two channels had different editorial pursuits, with the Arabic channel more narrowly focused on energy and trade between the Middle East and China. My counterparts in the Arabic bureau showed less interest in human rights stories, and I was never entirely sure why, considering *Al Jazeera Arabic's* tough coverage of citizens' rights during the Arab Spring in that same period. Even within the network, we had different ideas on how to cover China.

The network did task *Al Jazeera Arabic's* bureau chief to lobby on my behalf. Shahrour had done so in the past when the Foreign Ministry expressed dissatisfaction over reports of mine. He had expended political capital in doing so. The same source who provided me information about the involvement of three government divisions in my removal believes that this time, Shahrour disregarded management's request and opted to no longer support my case.

At the embassy level, diplomats at both the American and Qatari embassies were uncertain about taking on responsibility for my case, each referring to the other as the primary embassy that should lobby

on my behalf, a conundrum that worked in China's favor. After my departure, the State Department confirmed that it had raised my case to the Chinese, though it was not clear whether it had done so before or after my departure (Toner, 2012).

I started out in China in 2007 with a sincere desire to provide the most honest account of the country. It was also inevitable as I crisscrossed the provinces that I'd witness the many kinds of harm and hardship experienced by ordinary Chinese from a system with a weak rule of law and corrupt governance by a one-party state. According to my own records and assessment of the 400-odd stories I filed from there, my coverage did not skew disproportionately to human rights reports, but it probably felt that way to Chinese officials who watched my most dramatic moments of coverage. I do not know to what extent those stories contributed to the decision to expel me, but I know they did not help.

Where Things Stand

In hindsight, my departure was not the one-off many people had assumed it was. It became the first of many incidents pitting the Chinese government against foreign journalists in a tough period for the foreign press corps that, to date, has not seen much improvement.

The New York Times, an organization that authorities had most likely hoped to avoid direct confrontation with, became the primary target after David Barboza's 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation into the vast web of wealth former premier Wen Jiabao's family had accumulated. In a war of attrition, China did not hand out any new visas for *The New York Times* for the next three years.

In November 2013, China rejected the visa application of veteran American reporter Paul Mooney, who had a new job with Reuters (Jacobs, 2013). That same month, Bloomberg suspended investigative reporter Michael Forsythe, who had been working on a story about a Chinese billionaire with ties to the Communist Party leadership. Its editor-in-chief, Matthew Winkler, reportedly axed the story over concerns it would impact the company's lucrative financial terminals business (Wong & Haughney, 2013).

Al Jazeera English's new correspondent, Adrian Brown, did not dodge trouble. In May 2015, police pointed assault rifles and shotguns at the news team while they were covering protests in Sichuan Province. They took the cameraman's equipment and returned it only after deleting the footage (Brown, 2015).

The incident was included in the FCCC's 2015 report on working conditions, which started out with this assessment:

China's importance in current affairs continues to grow, and foreign journalists' efforts to chronicle the important events and changes have kept pace. Unfortunately, getting access to the news in China is not getting any easier. Official harassment, obstructions and intimidation of foreign correspondents and their local staff remain serious problems. (personal communication, May 26, 2015)

The report went on to say that 96% of foreign journalists surveyed felt China almost never met international standards for reporting. Thirty-three percent of reporters said conditions had deteriorated from the previous year.

If some had doubts about the state of media rights in the year after the Olympics, by 2015 and two years into Xi Jinping's presidency, it was clear that Chinese officials had a new set of marching orders on how to deal with the press. Xi may have felt that controlling information was critical to his anticorruption campaign. Another possibility is ideological—Xi simply believed in the media's subservient role in Communist orthodoxy as a tool to further party interests. Historically, that has been the place of media in China. Tim Weston's article in this journal collection, "Finger Pointing in Both Directions: The Politics of Sino-American Discourse on the Media, Past and Present," delves into this dynamic further (this Special Section). China's different expectations would naturally lead to conflict, both presently and in my personal story from 2007 to 2012. With Xi, a somewhat revealing moment came during a joint media event with President Obama in 2014. When asked about China's refusal to grant journalist visas to certain U.S. news organizations, Xi offered this metaphor, suggesting that the news outlets themselves were the problem:

When a car breaks down in the road, perhaps we need to get out of the car to see where the problem lies. . . . In Chinese, we have a saying, "The party which has created the problem, should be the one to resolve it." (Gerstein, 2014, para. 8)

With Xi still early into his 10-year tenure as president, the foreign press corps should expect no sympathy or reprieve in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

This article is framed around the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games and the entrance of *Al Jazeera English* the year before. The new, non-Western media organization had ambitions to change the prevailing English-language narrative, and as one of its correspondents in China, I traversed 19 of the country's 22 provinces searching for that alternative story. Those travels informed and changed my attitude of the country, but I do not believe I came up with anything radically different from the experiences of Western foreign correspondents before me or from the experiences of my contemporaries during my posting. As my negative experiences increased, so did my more critical view of the government and those people who kept the Communist Party in absolute power. And if I had failed to come up with a different set of China stories from the prevailing ones that the West presented and China resented, then would it not be unreasonable for me to conclude, at least to my own satisfaction, that the foreign press corps had done its job, and continues to do so, reporting China as fairly and accurately as possible? I am comfortable with my five years mediating China.

The ebb and flow of media restrictions in the years ahead of and after the Olympics have since been replaced by a much clearer position and message from the government. That a foreign reporter might be forced to leave, might not receive visa accreditation, or the possibility of direct intervention in the ordinary newsgathering process have become new norms. For some journalists, these threats play

into their decision to self-censor or their selection of stories in order to remain in the country. On the other hand, many other journalists continue to produce strong coverage of the country under much tougher circumstances, regardless of possible threats of expulsion or limitations to their reporting.

Compared to China's own approach to domestic news, with the clean, singular narrative arc authored by an on-message propaganda department, the individualism and independence of foreign reporters accustomed to a different set of standards must seem cacophonous and confusing to Chinese authorities. Unfortunately, I believe distrust between the government and foreign press corps will not change. Foreign reporters will continue to guess where the line is when pushing for press freedom. In turn, Chinese officials will never know what we will write next. The tussle continues.

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