



ZERO COVID MANY CONTROLS

Covering China in 2022

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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB OF CHINA
REPORT ON MEDIA FREEDOM IN 2022

INTRODUCTION

The foreign correspondent community in China experienced yet another tough and draining year in 2022. Heightened Covid controls throughout the year strangled the remaining coverage plans of many bureaus, which were already battered in morale and greatly diminished in numbers by successive expulsions and delays in granting new visas to incoming journalists.

"2022 was by far the most difficult year we've had in terms of being able to report around China. For the full year, we were only able to make one reporting trip outside Beijing, despite adding one new foreign correspondent to our ranks," said Jonathan Cheng, China bureau chief for the Wall Street Journal.

"Covid restrictions, especially to travel from one province to another, have made our coverage more complicated, especially during the November protests: we couldn't send any team to Wuhan because of the quarantine imposed upon arrival and the fact many hotels didn't accept guests from other provinces," noted Katell Abiven, Beijing bureau chief for Agence France-Presse.

Going into this year, many reporters expressed hope that after a grueling three years, 2023 would be an improvement from the pandemic period. "Many of our plans were canceled because of Covid restrictions, though we are hoping to see the reporting environment improve in 2023," said Cheng.

Yet a bevy of state restrictions, ongoing digital surveillance, and the continued harassment of Chinese colleagues and sources means existing challenges to true freedom of the press in China remain. Of the respondents to our survey, 100% said China did not meet international standards for press freedoms and reporting last year.

"The working environment for foreign correspondents in China remains well short of acceptable standards of press freedom. Perhaps the most dramatic escalation has been the tendency to be followed by carloads of officials almost every time we report outside Beijing. Apart from harassing journalists, they intimidate and pressure those we are trying to interview," said Stephen McDonnell, a reporter with the BBC in Beijing.

While bureaus are hopeful China's newly-opened borders may mean more visa approvals, most outlets say they are still waiting on entry permits and work accreditation for new reporters to boost headcounts that flagged dramatically during the global pandemic, cutting into outlets' capacity to cover one of the most populous nations on the planet. Select Japanese and European outlets have had success bringing in new reporters but fear geopolitical tensions could upset their access to visas at any moment.

"Visa access to China has improved slightly. A few new visas were issued last spring to American correspondents, after the United States issued a handful to Chinese correspondents. The duration of visas went back to one year instead of three months, a welcome change. But the number of American correspondents in Beijing and Shanghai remains a tiny fraction of the number of correspondents for Chinese news organizations in Washington and New York," said Adrienne Carter, Asia Editor at The New York Times.

In 2023, the outlook for visas still seems grim. U.S.-China negotiations over new visas for reporters working for American outlets have stalled. In at least one instance, an American reporter with a valid visa and press card had their residence permit revoked and was barred from re-entering China after they left the country for a routine trip. They were eventually forced to relocate elsewhere after months of failed negotiations. Such geopolitical targeting and uncertainties over visas complicate the ability of journalists to report on a complex country that is already a difficult cover.

The delays in granting visas and other obstacles in reporting stretched thin outlets' ability to cover a series of groundbreaking events in China in 2022. In February, Beijing hosted the Winter Olympic Games. October saw the all-important Communist Party Congress, then in November, peaceful demonstrations rolled out across the country against China's so-called "zero-Covid" policies. Within weeks, those policies were abruptly overturned and China quickly saw a massive surge in coronavirus infections.

Harassment of foreign journalists by officials and the security services also peaked during these newsmaking moments. "The reporting environment in Beijing and other parts of the country became especially difficult on two occasions last year. One was before the Party Congress and the other before and after the change of the zero-Covid policy. During these times, some of our TV and newspaper photojournalists were stopped and rough handled by people who appeared to be plainclothes public security officials, while shooting footage on the street or at funeral halls," said the bureau chief of a Japanese outlet.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which is tasked with interfacing directly with foreign journalists, has on a number of occasions tried to intervene in tense situations and assist foreign bureaus in overcoming such obstructions.

However, MOFA is often unable to prevent or stop more routine harassment that is largely instigated by China's more emboldened security ministries, the Public Security Bureau (PSB) and Ministry of State Security (MSS).

China continues to be one of the most important stories of our time, yet since the start of the global pandemic in 2020, press freedoms across the country have declined at an accelerated pace, and it remains to be seen if they will recover. Foreign correspondents on the ground traveled less and were able to cover far less in depth in 2022, largely because Covid restrictions. This year looks to be different, but press working conditions in China have significant room for improvement if journalists are to be able to tell the China story well, as the government claims to desire.



VISA DELAYS

Delays in granting new visas continue to be a major bottleneck that have stymied adequate staffing for bureaus. With fewer and fewer reporters on the ground in China, bureaus have had to limit the scope of their coverage and scale back more resource-intensive enterprise reporting.

This year saw some positive developments, albeit limited. European, Japanese, and Korean outlets continue having some success in securing journalist visas for new correspondents to enter and replace departing colleagues. Meanwhile, U.S.-China government negotiations secured nine visas for American correspondents, some of whom had been waiting for more than two years. However, negotiations for a second round of visas have stalled and non-American reporters working for U.S. outlets have still not been able to get new visas.

- **56% of bureaus which were waiting on new J-1 visas for correspondents last year said they had not yet received them**
- **Of those who had not received a visa, 60% said they were told geopolitical tensions were to blame for the delay**
- **38% of respondents said their bureaus were understaffed because they were unable to bring in the required number of reporters**

We couldn't attend [an official state event] as our bureau has less than a third of usual staff due to excessive waits for visas. We couldn't afford to be stuck in quarantine when we've got outlets to feed and coverage to produce. – Reporter with a Western outlet

On a positive note, those who did manage to remain in mainland China experienced a smooth process while renewing their press cards and residence permits. Being accredited in China is a three-step process. One must be granted a J-1 visa to enter the country, then apply for a press card from the foreign ministry and then finally apply for a residence permit, usually one year in length, from the Public Security Bureau.

- **77% said they had no issues while renewing their residence permits**
- **81% of correspondents said they received new press cards within 7 days**

For those who are already accredited to report in mainland China, the threat of residence permit non-renewal remains the Chinese state's favored tool in trying to limit critical reporting. Some 9% of respondents said they were told last year that their residence permits might not be granted in future due to their critical reporting.

With the lifting of Covid control measures in December 2022, reporters are now able to leave and re-enter China as long as they have valid residence permits. Moreover, reporters working for American outlets who previously were issued only three-month residence permits due to U.S.- China tensions (rather than the full one year) are now being issued one year residence permits again.

China has applied any relaxation in visa policy selectively, however; at least one American correspondent was unable to re-enter the country after a vacation in 2022 and was forced to permanently relocate despite having a valid press card, after their residence permit was revoked without evident cause and they were not given a reentry permit as agreed upon.

Alarmingly, China is also ramping up interrogation and harassment of foreign correspondents at airports and other border checkpoints.

- **10% said they experienced delay and/or harassment when leaving mainland China**
- **24% said they experienced a delay and/or harassment when entering mainland China**

When leaving China, reporters say they are stopped at immigration before boarding their flights and must wait up to an hour to be "cleared" to exit the country. To date, no one has been barred from leaving but many have nearly missed their flights. After landing in the Chinese mainland, foreign correspondents say they are taken aside when passing through immigration and must wait to be cleared to enter the country. Some have been interrogated for up to two hours about their work and coverage.



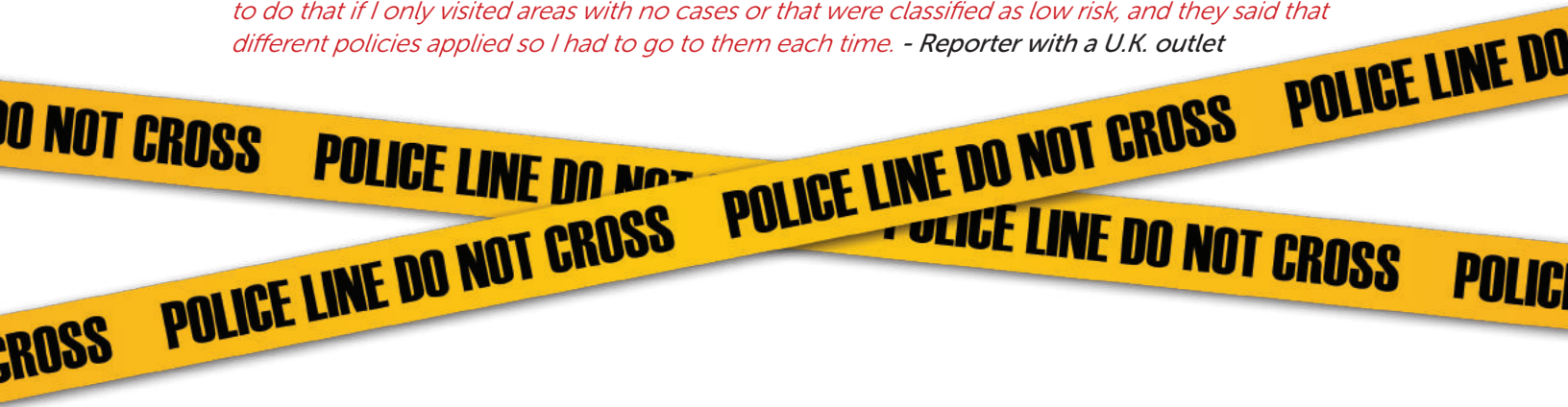
COVID IMPACT ON COVERAGE

Foreign correspondents endured even stricter controls in 2022 for the stated goal of public health, before the lifting of “zero-Covid” policies in mid-December.

- 63% of respondents experienced some kind of reporting obstruction nominally attributed to Covid-prevention measures, though those measures were not applied to ordinary Chinese citizens.
- 46% were told to leave a place or denied access for health and safety reasons when they presented no health risk by China’s own standards.
- 47% said they were unable to travel at some point because of issues with their healthcode, a government-run system which controlled people’s movements based on supposed infection risk
- 21% said they and/or their sources were put under lockdown, preventing reporting, at least once.
- 41.5% said they were forced to cancel four reporting trips or more due to Covid restrictions.

We went to the border town of Ruili. Entering the town was made very difficult for foreigners through the excuse of “Covid prevention,” even if there were no infections at the time and Chinese nationals could enter easily. – Reporter with a European outlet

My compound told me that I had to report to them every time I returned to Beijing and they would decide case-by-case where and for how long I’d have to quarantine. I asked why I had to do that if I only visited areas with no cases or that were classified as low risk, and they said that different policies applied so I had to go to them each time. – Reporter with a U.K. outlet



TARGETING JOURNALISTS

Independent reporting in China is often cut short or rendered outright impossible by outside interference.

- 56% of respondents said they were obstructed at least once by police or other officials during 2022 (compared to 62% the previous year)
- 36% of respondents said they were obstructed at least once by persons unknown

While still high, this represents a drop compared to the year before – one almost certainly the result of fewer reporting trips due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, as such obstructions often occur outside of the big cities during field trips.

On a recent reporting trip, security services followed me wherever I went. Security staff was posted at the lobby of my hotel. At least one, sometimes two large cars followed me around the city. Whenever I got out of a taxi, plain clothes officers got out and trailed closely behind. After I entered the train station to leave, several plainclothes and uniformed officers took photos or videos of me using their mobile phones. – Reporter for a Western outlet

While overall reports of on-site interference have decreased, the likelihood of it ending violently has gone up.

- Alarmingly, the share of respondents who said they were subjected to manhandling or use of physical force remains high: 14%, up from 12% the previous year.
- 31% of respondents report instances of trips or interviews being canceled because of *official pressure*.

On several occasions people who had agreed to share footage they had filmed with us and let us publish it later contacted me saying they suddenly had a change of heart. I learned that in at least one case this was because the individual had been threatened severely by the local authorities. – Reporter for a Western outlet

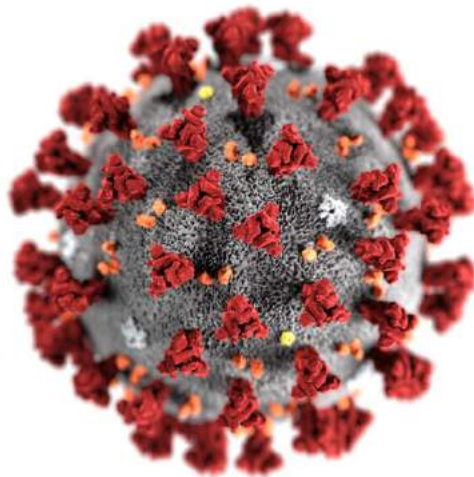
A major concern in last year’s report was the increasingly common use of legal threats against foreign journalists, nine of whom were targeted with a lawsuit in 2021. In 2022, this kind of legal intimidation decreased, with three colleagues saying they had been threatened with legal action or sued – one by government officials, two by sources.

A source served us legal notice for defamation after we suggested in a piece that he was being closely monitored by the police after getting out of prison for theft. This was objectively true, as when we tried to interview him for the piece, he was suddenly swarmed by a dozen police officers, and plainclothes officers followed us during and after the interview. We never took down the story as the legal threat seemed bluster and intended to intimidate, and nothing ever happened. – Reporter with an English-language outlet

In light of the threat of detention or lawsuits, numerous foreign journalists have made preparations for a “worst-case scenario,” i.e. the possibility of having to leave China quickly and on short notice.

- 25% of respondents have approached their embassy about these particular threats, and an equal number have made arrangements with their employer.
- Three people said they left China as a result of threats.

I decided to leave China for many reasons but this heightened risk of arbitrary detentions, threat of lawsuits and online harassment were all factors in my decision. -Reporter with an international outlet



REPORTING ON MAJOR EVENTS: THE WINTER OLYMPICS

In February 2022, China hosted the Beijing Winter Olympics, with journalists flying in from around the world to cover the Games under strict Covid protocols. While access within the Olympic bubble was relatively in-line with previous Games and overseen largely by the IOC and national Olympic bodies — the situation for those correspondents reporting from outside these areas was often very different.

- **70% of respondents said conditions did not meet international reporting standards at all during the Winter Olympics.**

As the FCCC noted in a statement at the time, “government interference occurred regularly during the Games, a symptom of the challenging operating environment for foreign media in China.”

When journalists attempted to report outside Olympic venues, they were frequently tailed and manhandled by propaganda and security officials. One reporter told the FCCC that after complaining about an incident on social media, they were asked by a foreign ministry handler to post a “clarification” saying it had all been a “big misunderstanding.” They politely refused.

There were only media events with group interviews prepared by the government. It was unclear who was admitted to these events and according to which criteria. It was not possible to request interview partners for a one-to-one interview by yourself. For example, Chinese athletes or coaches even from smaller sports gave no interviews. There was also nobody who would talk outside of the official media events.

– Reporter with a European outlet

Access even outside official venues was strictly controlled. Live-shots from the streets even kilometers away from stadiums and venues were disturbed. We were able to work but not as freely or openly as you might expect during an international sporting event of such magnitude. – Reporter with a European outlet

Beyond the Olympics, Beijing also hosted another major event in 2022: the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, at which President Xi Jinping secured a third term as leader of the CCP. The closest most journalists got to the Party Congress was watching live streamed videos of the public events on a screen in a designated media center.

- **36% of respondents who covered the Party Congress said they weren’t granted access to any of the events they applied for.**
- **29% said they couldn’t attend at least one of the events due to Covid-control-related obstructions, such as quarantine, testing requirements, or travel restrictions.**

Even for the select few given access to certain events, such as the opening and closing sessions, further Covid controls and last-minute testing requirements frequently prevented them from showing up in-person.

I had a pop-up on my Beijing health code so was quarantined and could not attend the Congress in person, although I was approved to attend and was in Beijing.

– Reporter with an English-language outlet

Another reporter with a European outlet said that even though they had been approved to attend the Congress’ closing session and the unveiling of the new Standing Committee, they were suddenly sent home from their quarantine hotel because they were a close contact of someone in their residential compound, despite not seeing that person for three days and testing negative repeatedly during the Congress.

In most cases, official press events were staged, with Chinese officials requiring media organizations they selected to also provide questions in advance so they could be vetted.

Furthermore, while foreign correspondents based in China were largely shunned from 20th Party Congress press events, 79% of survey respondents said events were filled with journalists who had been flown-in specifically and allowed to ask pre-screened questions.

I interviewed some of the foreign reporters who were at the Party Congress, most of whom were in China for a six month training. It appeared to me that many weren’t there to report on the event at all but some were willing to ask soft ball questions during press conference. – Reporter with a Western outlet

A lot of seats at the press conferences (which I was not invited to) and in the Great Hall of the People (which I was invited to for the opening) were filled by journalists who were said by colleagues to be on a Belt and Road Initiative study tour.

– Reporter with a European outlet

Similar difficulties were faced by reporters covering other official events:

When President Xi Jinping visited Hong Kong for the 25th handover anniversary, myself and many other foreign journalists were denied accreditation on “space” grounds despite Chinese and some local outlets being able to accredit dozens of staff. Colleagues who were accredited had invitations canceled at the last minute, often meaning their outlets could not cover the event, as it required PCR testing and quarantine in advance.

– James Griffiths, The Globe and Mail



ONLINE TROLLING

As with on-site obstructions, a slightly lower share of respondents said they were the subject of excessive social media attacks in 2022. While the year before almost a quarter of respondents had experienced such attacks, in 2022 it was 18%. However, this somewhat lower number does not capture the intensity and viciousness of individual campaigns.

I have had to block thousands of government-sponsored trolls and other nationalist trollaccounts which have attacked me on social media. – Stephen McDonell, BBC

Online trolling falls disproportionately on female journalists of East Asian descent, as well as Chinese employees of foreign news organizations. Attackers routinely disparage their coverage of China and make crude sexual innuendos, including alarming threats of physical violence.

My ethnicity has been targeted, I’ve been called a traitor and harassed with sexualized abuse. – Reporter with an international outlet

I am still subject to regular Chinese local media editorials criticizing ethnically Chinese and female reporters for being traitors. – Emily Feng, NPR

Such attacks on foreign journalists and their Chinese colleagues are sometimes directly encouraged and instigated by the state and state-backed entities.

A profile was made for me on Baidu Baike [a Chinese equivalent to Wikipedia] with a detailed career history that I hadn’t posted publicly elsewhere — it was an almost exact copy of the CV I had given to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon applying for my first J-1 visa in 2016. – Reporter with a British outlet

Online threats and attacks have real impact offline, creating unsafe situations and real physical danger to foreign journalists and their Chinese colleagues working in the field. One journalist with a Western outlet said that during a field reporting trip, their team was singled out and attacked online to the point they felt they had to leave for safety reasons.



FIELD ISSUES

The most common method for preventing reporting in 2022 has again been the most low-tech: the use of force. Chinese authorities continue to physically block and harass reporters whenever they decide to leave their offices:

- *57% said they were visibly followed during reporting.*
- *45% said their interviews were visibly monitored by security.*
- *50% said they were disrupted by the authorities while conducting an interview.*
- *18% said they were detained at least once in the course of reporting.*

Such harassment and intimidation worsened around sensitive political incidents or events, such as the Party Congress or the “Two Sessions” legislative meetings held annually in late winter or early spring.

I received a visit in my personal residence ahead of the Two Sessions by three policemen who asked my wife, since I wasn't home, to tell me I should do balanced reporting.
– **Jaime Santirso, Spanish daily ABC**

In December, protests and vigils spontaneously emerged across China to commemorate those who had suffered and died during successive lockdowns and to protest strict Covid controls. The demonstrations were later dubbed the “A4 Protests” after the sheets of white paper many participants held aloft. Reporting from these protests became a challenge, as 62% of the survey respondents said they or their Chinese colleagues experienced obstruction, harassment, or other intimidation.

While covering protests in Shanghai in late November, I was tackled, hit repeatedly, and detained by police. I was bundled into a police van and taken to a police station. While visiting funeral homes and hospitals in Hebei in December after Covid restrictions were lifted, we were tailed by Hebei propaganda officials. – **Reporter with a Western outlet**

During the demonstrations in Liangmahe, I was asked by a plainclothes policeman (who did show some form of ID briefly) to show my passport. He said he was from immigration and wanted to see my visa to see if it was valid. - **Reporter with a European outlet**

I was stopped by a group of policemen near Liangmaqiao after witnessing a forceful arrest and they asked me to delete my images of the incident before letting me go.
- **Jaime Santirso, Spanish daily ABC**

One of the most sensitive areas of coverage remains any story about China’s leader Xi Jinping. 25% of respondents said they or their media organization was harassed or obstructed while gathering stories about Xi, or threatened with repercussions following publication or broadcast of such stories.

The Economist’s Sue-Lin Wong said that during the production of a podcast series on Xi, she “wasn’t able to go to China to do reporting and could barely interview any Chinese people in China for the series [out of fear they would face reprisals].”

Making a podcast about Xi Jinping in 2022 was “like trying to make a podcast series about Joe Biden but not being allowed to go to America or speak to any Americans there,” she added. A reporter with a European newspaper said that “multiple sources on several Xi Jinping stories were threatened by state security agents.”

*During a trip to Liangjiahe in Shaanxi we were constantly followed by people unknown who would intimidate potential interviewees not to speak to us.
- Reporter with a European outlet*

After submitting our comment request to the Chinese Foreign Ministry about an article on Xi Jinping ahead of the Party Congress, we were called into a meeting where they warned of potential collective and specific consequences, and advised we do not publish the article. - Reporter with a U.S. outlet

Surveillance and intimidation were not limited to sensitive topics and events however.

We have been followed on multiple occasions by unidentified vehicles. This occurred in Baotou, Inner Mongolia and Shijiazhuang and Wuhan. Multiple cars would follow our movements from morning until night, tailing us until we left the city. Unidentified men in Baotou repeatedly pressured locals not to talk to us or to leave the area we were filming in. In Wuhan, while reporting on a Covid surge at the end of zero-Covid we were surrounded by police and local security staff who prevented us from leaving and tried to get us to delete our footage. – Reporter with a European outlet

TV crews are particularly at risk of harassment and disruption, with pieces to camera becoming more difficult in many parts of China. 57% of survey respondents were told prior permission was required to report, nearly 40% said they were asked or forced to delete data, around 36% were physically blocked from access to public areas, nearly 7% even had equipment confiscated or damaged.

A journalist with a European outlet said that while covering celebrations to mark the end of the Shanghai lockdown, “I was hit and my filming equipment was grabbed by a police officer, and I was threatened and forced to delete footage (of people celebrating).” They were surrounded by 25 police, including two senior officers, and “harassed for about an hour and threatened several times,” while being told they needed permission to be on a public street.

A crew from a European broadcaster said they often experienced police officers “stopping us filming on the street by asking for our IDs” or otherwise distracting them, telling them to leave.



REPORTING FROM SENSITIVE AREAS: XINJIANG AND TIBET

Almost all respondents (91%) said they were unable to travel to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in 2022 because of Covid restrictions. Many parts of Xinjiang were in lockdown for months during 2022. Only two respondents said they were able to visit the region in 2022, a 94% decrease from the year prior when 32 correspondents made it there.

To go to Xinjiang, I was told I had to fill out a form online to travel there but the travel form only took Chinese ID numbers and not passport numbers. Next I was told I needed to do a quarantine, but if I did not have my own apartment in Xinjiang, I would have nowhere to quarantine. – Reporter with an English-language outlet

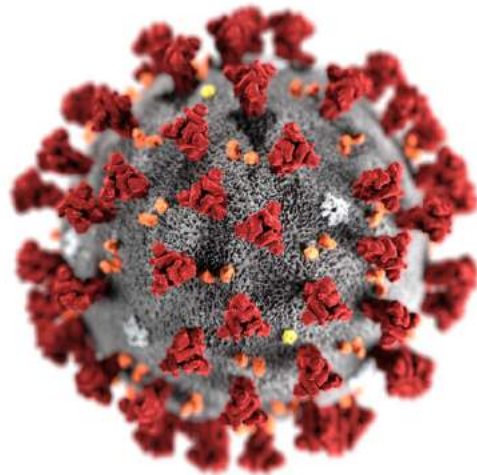
Access to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) remains officially restricted for foreign journalists. Reporters must apply to the government for special permission or join a press tour organized by China's State Council or MOFA. Three respondents applied for permission in 2022, but all were turned down.

While fewer foreign journalists visited other sensitive areas (like Inner Mongolia or China's border with North Korea) in 2022, they almost all reported being harassed. This included being followed by police or local officials, prevented from filming, from taking pictures or doing interviews, or being detained. Authorities often invoked Covid restrictions to stop them from working.

I was stopped and detained by police and local officials in a Tibetan area of Sichuan. Officials claimed because of Covid controls, foreigners were not being allowed in, even though I had three negative Covid tests in the past three days. They tried to force me onto a plane to Chengdu, but when the plane was canceled, they refused to let me go and drove me straight to Chengdu instead, a nearly 11 hour drive.

– Reporter with a Western outlet

At the North Korea border, I was followed by PSB cars and they told me not to take photos of the North Korean side. – Koichi Yonemura, Mainichi



PRESSURE AND THREATS AGAINST SOURCES

To prevent independent reporting, Chinese authorities harass and intimidate those most vulnerable to political coercion: Chinese sources. In extreme cases, sources have been sentenced to prison, police have intercepted interviewees on their way to meet journalists, and they have threatened sources in front of correspondents.

- *In 2022, 38% of respondents said at least one of their sources had been harassed, detained, called in for questioning by the authorities, or otherwise suffered negative consequences for interacting with foreign journalists, up from only a quarter last year.*

Multiple respondents reported interviewees receiving visits or instructions from police telling them not to speak to foreign media in future.

- *20% of respondents said they had direct evidence interviews were withdrawn as a result of official pressure.*

Interviews with experts, human rights lawyers and individuals have been canceled at the last minute, after they have been contacted and advised not to talk with foreign media

– Reporter with a European outlet

A farm owner canceled our interview at the 11th hour after the local public security bureau threatened her not to speak to me about grain security.

– Reporter with a European outlet

- *78% of respondents said they had been told by prospective interviewees they were not permitted to speak to foreign media, or would require prior permission to do so.*

The list of people in China who told me they're not allowed to speak with foreign media is simply too long to even remember. Employees of state-owned companies, government workers, doctors and nurses, workers at vaccination centers, (most) academics, epidemic workers, experts at think tanks, teachers... they've all told me they're not allowed to speak to me, even on the most trivial topics. – Leen Vervaeke, De Volkskrant

The pressure with regard to stories can sometimes extend beyond China's borders. 18 % of respondents said editors at headquarters had been contacted by the government regarding China stories.

One editor at a Western newspaper said Chinese officials went over their head to bosses in their home country to try and stop an investigative piece.

The Chinese Embassy demanded the publication of a harsh letter to the editor and a meeting with my editor after we published an interview with the Taiwanese Foreign Minister. We did not publish the letter to the editor. – Reporter with a German outlet



THREATS AGAINST CHINESE COLLEAGUES

While threats against foreign correspondents are worrying, by far one of the biggest concerns for foreign news bureaus in mainland China has been the increased threats against their Chinese colleagues.

One local colleague left post as a result of harassment, and another was relocated out of China. – Reporter with a Western outlet

Chinese colleagues do not enjoy the considerable protection a foreign passport lends and can be the first target Chinese security personnel threaten during sensitive periods.

- *45% of respondents said their Chinese colleague(s) were pressured, harassed, or intimidated at least once in 2022, up from 40% last year.*
- *A similar proportion (46%) reported that they had put in place measures to provide support and reassurance to their Chinese colleagues.*

Agents from the Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS) continue to surreptitiously meet with and pressure Chinese employees. 16% of respondents said they were aware that MSS agents had approached members of their bureau, though MSS nearly always forbids Chinese nationals they contact from disclosing their meetings and the true percentage is likely far higher.

Police from their hometown called my colleague on at least three separate occasions while state security pressured them to meet in-person, possibly in connection with research or reporting on religion and the Covid public health response.

– Reporter with a European outlet

Police called their parents, who are employed by the state, and threatened to cut off their pensions if they didn't stop their child from pursuing a certain investigation.

– Reporter with a Western outlet

Harassment of Chinese employees spiked after demonstrations took place in Beijing and Shanghai in November. Many bureaus' local staff observed the events purely for work, but nearly a dozen were detained or questioned by police afterwards.

A Chinese colleague was called to go to the police station late at night and was questioned about her involvement in protest Telegram groups. She was let go after about an hour. – Reporter with a Western outlet

My assistant's flatmates told her the police had been at her home looking for her. They picked her up with three men around midnight and asked if her laptop was at home. The officer then positioned a camera towards her, asked her several questions and typed out her answers. The questions related to: her personal study background, her parents background, what kind of work she does, info/details on me, our office, what kind of topics we report on, if we went to the protest Sunday, what did we see, if we took pictures, if she participated in the protest, if we knew people in the demonstration, and if she had VPN and other social media accounts. Then the cop returned with three print-outs of her statements, which she all had to sign and fingerprint. - Reporter with a European outlet

The Chinese government mandates that its own citizens only be allowed to do "auxiliary" work – such as translation or driving – for foreign news bureaus and are increasingly strict on enforcing such rules, which means Chinese employees are forbidden from even attending press conferences on their own or asking questions at public events.

Another way the state has ramped up control over Chinese employees has been to delay or outright deny permission for them to work. That is because any Chinese national employed by a foreign bureau must first be approved and hired by a department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and then subcontracted to the media outlet. Beginning in 2021, bureaus continue to report that the ministry has slow-balled or rejected their chosen applicants.

On average, the wait time to approve a new Chinese employee has been two to three months, with 82% of respondents saying they had to wait two months or more. Three outlets said they had to give up on hiring last year because they never received approval for their chosen candidate.

Before taking on their new job, one Chinese colleague received a threatening call from a man who knew of their new job and warned them not to move to their new job, saying it was forbidden to enter the city without his permission. They queried my new employee about their education background and said, "Someday you will come to my office eventually. We will wait and see." – Reporter with a European outlet

Tried to hire one researcher this year and was never given one answer or another. We gave up after about three months of waiting. - Reporter with an English-language outlet



HUMAN AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Foreign correspondents and their Chinese colleagues continued to feel the weight of surveillance intruding on their ability to report effectively and threatening their personal security in 2022:

- *Large majorities of respondents believed that government authorities had possibly or definitely compromised their communications on WeChat (85%), fixed line or mobile phone calls (72%) and through audio recording bugs in their office or home (61%).*
- *41% reported regularly fearing that surveillance had compromised their ability to adequately interview and communicate with sources and carry out reporting.*
- *One in three respondents (36%) said they had reason to suspect their internet accounts had been attacked.*
- *19% reported having been tracked by public surveillance systems while reporting.*

Despite these concerns, a majority of respondents stated that the support from their organization in relation to cybersecurity was either not applicable to the challenges they faced in China (49%) or that they had no support at all (13%).

A source received multiple and sustained calls from the local police, over a period of several weeks, asking what he talked to me about and why he didn't notify them in advance. They told him they'd read our WeChat messages and asked for repeated meetings that have disrupted his job. – Reporter with an American outlet

A source who had shared content from protests privately through WeChat was later called in by police and questioned specifically about their communication with us. – Reporter with a Western outlet

- *A third of respondents (36%) said they had reason to suspect there had been attempts to hack their internet accounts. Their reasons for believing this included:*
- *Warnings from the account provider that attempts were being made to log into the account (21%). Receiving SMS with login verification codes that had not been requested (11%).*
- *Government officials having information that could only have been obtained through accessing these accounts (6%).*

Unsolicited login requests were more likely to have been experienced on instant messaging and social media platforms, while warnings from providers were more likely to come from attempted intrusions to email accounts.

And while less sophisticated attacks may have been picked up and deterred by email providers, highly motivated and well-resourced actors employing more sophisticated techniques were successful in at least one well-publicized China-focused attack on a foreign media organization.

Only 8% of respondents said that the fear of surveillance had not affected their ability to conduct their reporting, while just over half (51%) said this fear had affected their reporting a little, and 41% said that it regularly disrupted their ability to report adequately.

On a number of other occasions, individuals were contacted by authorities about me and then went on to delete me on WeChat. When I re-added them their tone had changed dramatically from the previous time we spoke. Whereas before they were very open and willing to talk, after re-adding them they would largely seem extremely cautious and nervous. Many said that they had been told they were not allowed to speak to foreign media. At least two told me they had been asked to sign a pledge by the local security services saying that henceforth they would not speak to foreign reporters.

– Reporter with a Western outlet

It wasn't so much obstructing or harassing me as a journalist, but intimidating everyone else: Xinjiang style. When no one is able or wanting to talk with you, reporting becomes impossible. - Reporter with a European outlet



CONCLUSION

Overall, the foreign correspondent community in China saw a slight decrease in the incidence of harassment and restrictions on reporting, with major exceptions around politically sensitive events. Unfortunately, that decrease can likely be attributed entirely to the near complete pause in travel and reporting trips last year due to Covid restrictions.

While the targeting and intimidation of foreign journalists remained the same or even dropped, state harassment of Chinese colleagues and Chinese sources contacted by foreign outlets has increased dramatically. This portends badly for coverage, where even the few journalists who are given credentials to live and work in China are unable to safely work with and talk to Chinese citizens.

The FCCC expresses cautious optimism for the new year as China begins a new phase in Covid control and re-opens its borders. However, we are not hopeful that the substantive issues at the heart of what makes China a daunting country to report on will be resolved.

SURVEY METHODS

This report is based on a survey of journalists who belong to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China. Conducted in December 2022 and January 2023, 102 of 166 correspondent members, representing news organizations from 30 countries and regions, responded to the survey. More than one in 10 respondents were based outside of mainland China because they were unable to receive accreditation to report there – a reflection of how journalism about China is increasingly becoming remote.

Percentages reflect the proportion of responses to a specific question. Not all respondents answered every question. Additional interviews with bureau chiefs at major news organizations headquartered in North America, Asia, and Europe were conducted for this report.

For data citations, please credit the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC), a Beijing based professional association.