



PODCAST

Ep. 2: American Correspondents in China

Foreign correspondents have been instrumental in telling the story of how China has changed since World War II. So, we turned the microphone on them

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — NOVEMBER 7, 2023

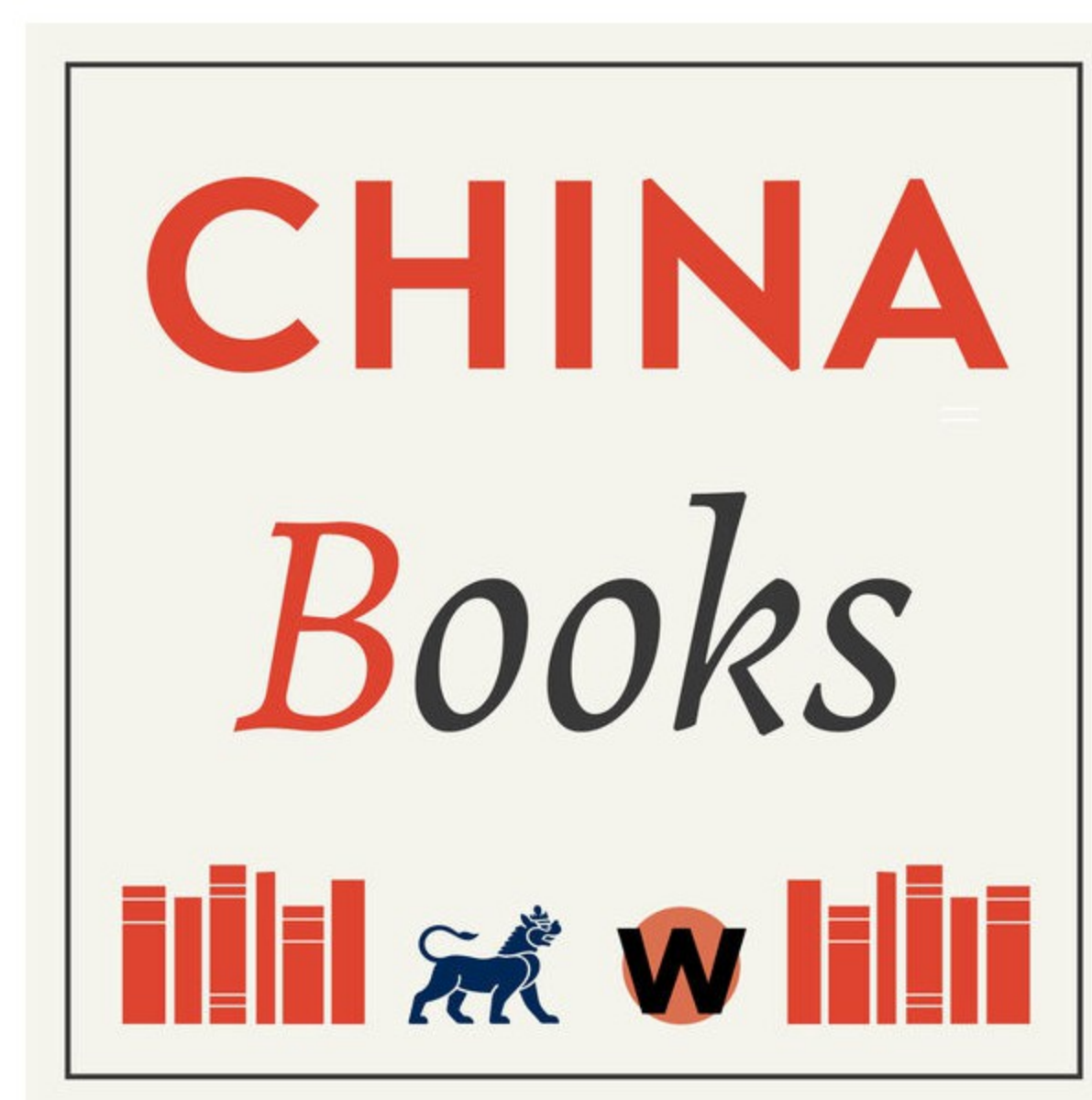
HISTORY

MEDIA



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China's rise is one of the great stories of the past century. China correspondents have told that story in myriad ways: as a story of transformation; of falling poverty rates and rising power; of new wealth and old political elites; of new opportunities and unintended consequences; of abuses of rights and power; of surveillance and censorship. Together, these pieces formed a complex and sometimes contradictory picture — shaping understandings, and sometimes misunderstandings, about how China is changing and how it is changing the world.



American correspondents have been a big part of this effort. In this episode, I talk to former CNN China correspondent Mike Chinoy about his recent book and documentary film series [Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People's Republic](#), as well as how the work of American China correspondents has changed over seven decades, why China correspondents matter, and what we lose when fewer are in the field.



China Books

Ep. 2: American Correspondents in China



00:00 | 45:44

Guest



Mike Chinoy was a CNN foreign correspondent for 24 years, serving as the network's first Beijing Bureau Chief. He has won Emmy, Dupont and Peabody awards for his coverage of China. He is also the author of books including *China Live: People Power and the Television Revolution*, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, and, most recently, *Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People's Republic*. Currently he is a Taipei-based Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the University of Southern California's U.S.-China Institute.

Journalists featured/mentioned

Mary Kay Magistad (NPR, *The World*)

Mike Chinoy (CNN)

Seymour Topping (Associated Press)

Annalee Jacoby (*Time*)

John Roderick (Associated Press)

Barbara Walters (NBC)

Stanley Karnow (*The Washington Post*)

Melinda Liu (Newsweek)

Graham Earnshaw (Reuters)

Daniel Southerland (*The Washington Post*)

Dan Rather (CBS)

Dorinda Elliott (*Newsweek*)

Jim McGregor (*Wall Street Journal*)

Kathy Chen (*Wall Street Journal*)

Leslie Chang (*Wall Street Journal*)

Peter Hessler (*The New Yorker*)

Ian Johnson (*The New York Times*)

John Ruwitch (NPR)

Transcript

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Foreign correspondents, over more than a century, have pounded out their stories – on teletypes, on typewriters, on MacBooks. They've traveled the globe, parachuting in – or digging in deep for years, even decades, to better understand a country and a culture, and what all that's happening there means to a home audience.

American correspondents and news organizations have been doing that in China for much of the past century – writing the first draft of history and telling the stories that – ideally – help everyone better understand one of the most complex and consequential places on earth. This episode is all about that.

(Crossfade to music)

I'm Mary Kay Magistad, and this is the China Books podcast – a companion of the *China Books Review*, co-published by *The Wire China* and Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations, where I'm deputy director.

(Music continues and fades out)

And this topic is close to my heart. I was a Beijing-based China correspondent for 15 years – first for NPR in the mid to late '90s, then for the U.S. public radio program *The World*. In fact, I was just coming into China for NPR when my guest on this episode was wrapping up his long stint there:

01:27: **MIKE CHINOY:** I'm Mike Chinoy. I am currently a non-resident senior fellow at the University of Southern California's U.S. China Institute. I was a foreign correspondent for CNN for 24 years, serving in London, and then as the network's first Beijing bureau chief, and then as senior Asia correspondent, and the author of five books, the most recent of which is *Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People's Republic*.

01:54: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** *Assignment China* isn't just a book. It's a 15-year-long project that Mike undertook, with the University of Southern California's U.S. China Institute, to interview more than 100 China correspondents – largely Americans from U.S. media – from over the decades. From this, Mike created a dozen hour-long documentaries that show the arc of who covered China over time, bringing in what sensibilities, covering what stories, with what impacts on the U.S.-China relationship, and on Americans' general understanding of China.

02:27: **MIKE CHINOY:** Well, I think it's fair to say this was a labor of love. I mean, my whole professional life has been largely, although not exclusively, but largely focused on trying to make sense of China and trying to report on China. So I have a deep personal interest in how that's done. And I also feel very strongly, as somebody who worked as a foreign correspondent for so many years, that the vast majority of consumers of news don't really have any sense of what goes into the coverage itself. What do you do when you are the Associated Press correspondent in Nanjing and the Red Army comes through the city gates in 1949? What do you do in the middle of the Cultural Revolution when you're sitting in Hong Kong, you can't get to China? What was it like on the Nixon press plane? What was it like to open the first *New York Times* Bureau after normalization? What was it like to be the photographer who took the picture of the man in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square, and so on.

03:29: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** *Assignment China* starts in the 1940s, when American journalists based in China were covering the Chinese Communist insurgents' fight to seize power from the Kuomintang government.

Seymour Topping of the Associated Press and Annalee Jacoby, who was then a Time Magazine photographer, recalled in interviews with Mike that many correspondents saw the Communists as reformists, and that Americans back home weren't getting why the anti-corruption message was winning them so much popular support:

03:58: **SEYMOUR TOPPING:** There was a great deal of admiration among the correspondents for the Communists.

ANNALEE JACOBY: Anybody that was well-informed in Nanking at the time realized that the Communist victory was inevitable. They were going to win.

(Sound of Mao declaring the Chinese people have stood up.)

04:19: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And they did ... Leaving most American and other foreign correspondents to have to find ways to cover China from the outside, like John Roderick of the Associated Press:

JOHN RODERICK: There in Hong Kong was a curious breed of reporter called the "China Watchers." Our job was to report on China from outside of China, in this case, Hong Kong.

04:44: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Without correspondents on the ground, China became opaque to many Americans for a couple of decades – through the Great Leap Forward, the great famine that killed tens of millions of Chinese, and much of the Cultural Revolution. But then,

04:57: **PRESIDENT NIXON:** The announcement I will now read is being issued simultaneously in Peking, and in the United States.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: President Richard Nixon announced in July 1971 that he would visit China the following February, and would bring journalists. NBC's Barbara Walters recalls in *Assignment China* how she felt:

BARBARA WALTERS: I knew nothing about China. Nobody had any idea what it really looked like. It really was like going on the moon. What were we going to see? We had no idea what to expect.

PRESIDENT NIXON: (*Cameras clicking*) And one stands there, and sees the wall going to the peak of this mountain, and I think that you would have to conclude that this is a great wall, and it had to be built by a great people. I think one of the results of our trip, we hope, may be that the walls that are erected, whether they're physical walls like this, or whether they are other walls – ideology or philosophy – will not divide people in the world.

STANLEY KARNOW (*The Washington Post*): Nixon called it the week that changed the world. And it was. You know, it was a big event.

BARBARA WALTERS (NBC News): This is what was important. It changed our view about China. But it also changed China's view of the United States.

BERNARD KALB (CBS News): The impact of television on the American audience was extraordinary. China had suddenly come alive, and all the rest is commentary.

06:20: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** That was, in order, President Nixon, Stanley Karnow of *The Washington Post*, NBC's Barbara Walters and Bernard Kalb of CBS.

After that visit, China started to open up to U.S. news organizations being based in Beijing. One of the first correspondents to set up a bureau was *Newsweek's* Melinda Liu:

MELINDA LIU: We definitely felt like pioneers, particularly those who came with kids and family, to be living in this Chinese hotel that was – I mean, this was the kind of hotel where the room boys would literally, it just didn't matter, they would just come into your room to start cleaning, whether your door was locked, whether you were taking a bath, whether you were changing your clothes. They were just going to come in there. My room was invested by bats.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Graham Earnshaw was then a young reporter with the Reuters News Agency.

GRAHAM EARNSHAW: We were highly constrained, all of the journalists, American journalists too. We were all sort of trapped in these compounds in Beijing.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Getting out and about was still possible. It was just easier for some than for others.

07:29: **MELINDA LIU:** I mean, I'm an American-born Chinese. I look Chinese. So for me, it was much simpler. But I still had to put on a big old great coat with the furry collar, and a big hat, and shoes – you know, your shoes always gave you away as a foreigner, so you had to wear Chinese shoes, and slip out, so that people thought you might be a local. Because otherwise, people would follow you, find out who you'd talked to, find out what you'd said.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Correspondents would sometimes gather for a little music, and a few laughs. Graham Earnshaw, the young Reuters reporter – now himself an author and book publisher – was good at providing both:

GRAHAM EARNSHAW (singing): Oh, my old man's a cadre.

He wears a cadre's hat.

He has a big black limo

With curtains in the back.

And when I am a cadre

I'll be the same way too

And as for Serve the People,

I've got better things to do.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: It all got easier, for awhile in the 1980s, recalls Daniel Southerland, who was in China then for *The Washington Post*:

08:31: **DANIEL SOUTHERLAND:** I think '88 was the most open year I was able to observe while I was there, which was really exciting, because I did stories on art and music and things changing, and people talking

about sex, more than they ever were able to before. People trying out jobs. Experiments going on, and some opening up in the media.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: There were even salons on college campuses, where students talked about political reform. And then came the 1989 Tiananmen protests started out being against corruption, but morphed into a call for greater openness – protests in the heart of Beijing, with the old imperial palace to the north, Mao Zedong’s mausoleum to the south, the National Museum of China to the east and the Great Hall of the People to the west. Dan Rather of CBS was there, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to visit:

DAN RATHER (CBS): The world’s largest public square has now become the scene of the biggest demonstration of the history of Communist China.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Mike Chinoy himself reported on the protests live from Tiananmen Square, for CNN, for weeks ...

MIKE CHINOY: The scene at Tiananmen showed the depth of public discontent here now, over inflation, corruption, and the lack of political freedom.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: ... until the Chinese government pulled the plug on the live broadcasts, declared martial law and, on the night of June 3rd, spilling into June 4th – brought in the troops that killed hundreds of protesters and bystanders, and cleared the Square.

The aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown was bleak, says Dorinda Elliott, who was then in Beijing with Newsweek.

10:05: **DORINA ELLIOTT:** I mean, it was just like – this was a different country. Nobody would talk to you. Everybody was terrified. It was just the most shocking and depressing thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Some correspondents left, disheartened to have seen the hope and energy of the late ‘80s curdle into repression. But then, in the early ‘90s, Deng Xiaoping pushed for greater economic reform and opening up – just without the political reform – and many Chinese chose to move forward however they could. The entrepreneurial energy of the 1990s laid the groundwork of the boom that was to reshape the global economy. Jim McGregor was then in China with the Wall Street Journal:

10:45: **JIM MCGREGOR:** Every time you’d go out to an economic zone, or meet a mayor, or even a governor or Party Secretary, who were all pretty accessible in those days, you would sit down, and they’d all tell you the same things. And then they’d say, ‘ok. Now, you’re from the Wall Street Journal. We need more foreign investment. How can we get more foreign investment? How can you help us? Let us show you what we have. Everywhere.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: That’s about when I came in – to open NPR’s bureau in China, in 1996. I remember going into the Foreign Ministry, being invited to sit in a big reception room. I was given my press card and a book of regulations – which, even then, said foreign correspondents were supposed to ask permission from the ‘appropriate authorities’ before interviewing almost anyone, or traveling anywhere, though correspondents living in China were already finding ways around those regulations. The mid-level foreign ministry officials were friendly, and one surprised me by saying, “We don’t expect everything you write to be positive. We just hope it will be fair.”

11:45: I thought of that encounter more than once during my years reporting throughout China, as a reminder to expect the unexpected. What seemed impossible could end up being remarkably easy. What seemed like it should be easy could hit a confounding snag. Regulations were vaguely worded and unevenly enforced. I could report on a controversial issue in one place with no problem, while another journalist reporting on it in another place got detained. Even under the past decade of tightened surveillance and expulsions of correspondents under Xi Jinping, several of the correspondents who remained in China still managed to report, in Xinjiang, in detentions of hundreds of thousands of Uighurs. And others reported on other sensitive subjects.

12:29: That said, the government did kick out at least 18 American correspondents in early 2020, in retaliation for then-President Trump making some 60 Chinese correspondents for state-run media leave the United States. Also in China, it became harder to get visas for new correspondents. But even then, 39 American correspondents were still on the ground, by the count of the Foreign Correspondents Club of China – which has a total of some 160 correspondent members.

They share, in common with correspondents who have reported in China over time, a desire to tell stories that matter, and a drive to find ways around obstacles to tell those stories. Back to Mike Chinoy.

13:14: **MIKE CHINOY:** And I think, as anybody who's been in the news business knows, the process profoundly influences the final outcome. I felt very strongly – it would be a really good thing for people to get a sense of who the folks were who have covered China. What were they like? How did they get there? And what did they do? What was it like?

And I hope people who are interested in journalism and in China and in trying to get a sense of what it's really like, will come away with a much deeper appreciation of what goes into what you watch and read and listen to every day.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: So it's said that journalism is the first draft of history. How much do you find that that's literally true regarding China?

13:56: **MIKE CHINOY:** Well, the notion that it is the first rough draft of history, I think, is true in the sense that it's the journalists who are out there, essentially on the front line, witnessing and reporting events in as close to real time as possible. In China, it's been complicated by the fact that there were many, many years when Western journalists, American journalists in particular, weren't able to go to the People's Republic.

So you had this whole sort of second-hand technique for reporting, the so-called China watchers who sat in places like Hong Kong, reading the tea leaves from a distance and trying to figure out what was going on. So that limited the sense of being an eyewitness on the ground.

After the Nixon trip in 1972, and then after the U.S. and China established diplomatic relations, it became increasingly possible for journalists to go to China and to open up bureaus. I opened the first CNN bureau, for example, and there was a period from the early, mid-80s on until a few years ago, when the general trend in China was towards the country becoming more accessible. The number of foreign correspondents increased quite dramatically – where they could go, what they could do – which was severely constrained in the very early days when American news organizations were allowed to open bureaus – changed. It became much easier to travel. You didn't have to get written permission from a foreign affairs office 10 days in advance to go anywhere.

But in the last few years, as Xi Jinping has consolidated his power, made himself effectively emperor for life, and as Sino-American relations have deteriorated, we've seen expulsions of large numbers of journalists for American news organizations. Journalists not only for American but for many Western news organizations are having great difficulty getting visas. Working conditions on the ground in China are increasingly difficult, not only official hostility, but a public that has been essentially brainwashed through the official press to see journalists as hostile, suspicious spy-type figures are themselves becoming less cooperative, which is a problem on many levels in terms of understanding what's going on and conveying that to the people who consume news.

16:27: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Let's talk about that a little more. What impact do you think it has on the understanding that Americans in particular have about China and that policymakers have about China?

MIKE CHINOY: The lack of access by so many American news organizations is having an enormous impact on many levels. It means that it's increasingly difficult for journalists to travel around the country and kind of just get a sense of the feel of the place, what's on people's minds, what's going on in small towns, in villages, in areas away from Beijing.

And so for the small number of journalists who are on the ground and the ever-increasing number of journalists who are sitting in places like Taipei, where I live, or in Seoul or in Hong Kong or in Washington, you're looking at everything from a distance. And one of the consequences is that increasingly, the focus of the coverage is on what one can sort of get a handle on from those vantage points. That means Sino-American tensions. It means security issues. It means China's interactions with the rest of the world, all of which are hugely important, but we're missing the kind of coverage that gives you a sense of what China and the 1.3 billion human beings who live there, what it's like as a living, breathing society. And it also means that a sense of the humanity of ordinary Chinese people – and most ordinary Chinese people don't get up every day thinking about retaking Taiwan, or America blocking China's rise or Sino-Indian tensions. They think about what most normal people – they think about their family, their job, their daily life. And we just don't have a sense of that.

And I would also argue that that is an "own goal" from the Chinese government's point of view. Because Beijing complains all the time about the nature of the foreign news coverage, but if you don't let foreign journalists get out and see the country, that's what you're going to get. It's not the only own goal. I think you can make a convincing case that a great deal of what we've seen under Xi Jinping has been one own goal after another, domestically and internationally, and blocking, limiting the foreign press coverage certainly is part of

that.

18:55: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** There has been this tendency over time, as you lay out in *Assignment China*, and as we both experienced on the ground as correspondents in China, of the government trying to shape the message. And that often goes horribly wrong in terms of the outcome they'd like to have happen and then what actually gets reported. What examples come to mind for you?

MIKE CHINOY: One of the themes in *Assignment China* is this constant tension between American and other foreign reporters trying to dig beneath the surface and beyond the propaganda and the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to prevent them from doing that.

So we all had our struggles with the *waiban* – the Foreign Affairs offices in different cities, not letting us go to certain places, or making it difficult. Or even on petty things, I remember asking to see an automobile factory in Northeast China. And we went and they said, here's the factory. I said, 'where are the workers?' They said, 'it's their day off.' And I said, 'it's not very useful to us for, as a TV team, if we can't film the workers.' And they said, 'but you didn't say that you wanted to film the workers. You only said you wanted to film the factory. So here's the factory.'

But when you look back on it, I think that the '80s and '90s and early 2000s, the period when we were both there, with the benefit of hindsight, is almost a kind of golden period, in terms of covering China. Because for all the aggravations, for all the roadblocks, for all the frustrations, there were ways to get around it. You could do a head fake, and leave your minders sitting in the hotel, and run off and meet somebody. Or the guides would go home at five o'clock and you could meet people in the evening. On my trip to Tibet in 1988, we had very tight controls from eight in the morning till five. And then the guide went off, and my camera crew and I rented bicycles and went all over Lhasa and found dissidents and monks and so on.

That's not really possible anymore, partly because of the use of intrusive, sophisticated surveillance technology. They can follow everywhere you go. They can listen to almost everything that you say. They can monitor almost everybody you interact with. And so, the techniques that were adopted, sometimes cloak-and-dagger sort of techniques to get the story and evade the monitoring and the surveillance, is much, much more difficult. And that makes one oddly sentimental for a period that one didn't feel so sentimental about when you were going through it at the time.

21:40: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, although even back in the mid-'90s, when I was first reporting in China, some of the local foreign office officials, the *waiban* officials would actually be incredibly helpful. There was one who had been sent down to the countryside and wasn't allowed to come back – this was during the Cultural Revolution and kind of had a (an attitude of) 'well, what are they going to do to me? Send me out here? What do you want to know? Where can I take you? Oh, you want to see state-owned enterprises that are failing? Sure. Let's go.'

And at the same time, even as we're talking about more sophisticated surveillance systems now, in *Assignment China*, you talk about a journalist in the – I believe it was in the '80s who had befriended a relative of a Chinese- American he knew. They got together a few times just to socialize. And that young man was brought in by the Public Security, played recordings of his calls to this journalist and shown photos of him walking through parks and department stores with this journalist. I remember stories of people saying that they were – someone was played back a conversation that happened at their dining room table. They made the most that they could with the surveillance capabilities they had, even decades ago.

23:05: **MIKE CHINOY:** There's no question. I mean, there was always a kind of running joke that if you really needed something fixed in your apartment, you would talk into the lamp. And hopefully the people listening to the wiretap would hear it and they'd come fix your leaky pipe or whatever. Yeah, the surveillance was omnipresent. And how aggressively it was used to constrain what journalists could do, really depended on the political climate.

Like, Kathy Chen of the *Wall Street Journal* talks in *Assignment China* about doing this fascinating trip in the early, mid-90s, when millions of poor Chinese were coming from the rural areas in the west to work in the factories along the east coast in the Special Economic Zones that kind of powered the boom. And she got permission to ride on a bus from Sichuan with a half dozen girls who were taking their first bus ride. And they ended up, I think, in Dongguan in Guangdong province, where they all worked in a Mattel factory.

And it was the Foreign Affairs office in Sichuan that arranged for her to do that, and didn't send somebody – she's Chinese American, spoke Chinese – didn't send somebody to follow her. And so she got this wonderful human interest story that humanized this phenomenon. Instead of millions of faceless Chinese, it was a handful of teenage girls that we got to know. And then Kathy was able, because she's ethnically Chinese, able

to sneak into the Mattel factory and talk to them there and see what their life was like.

24:40: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** A successor to her, it's worth noting, was Leslie Chang, also from the Wall Street Journal, who was able to do an extraordinary amount of reporting, following young women who were going to work in factories in Southern China, and who had these hopes and aspirations for how this was going to transform their lives. And it showed a complex picture of what life was like for them. And of course this went into her book, *Factory Girls*. And I point to that, as well as to her husband, Peter Hessler's book, *River Town*, as examples of journalism that actually is not just a first draft of history, but it's sort of an enduring history of a very particular moment in China.

25:25: **MIKE CHINOY:** Right. I agree. And Peter, I spoke with at length for *Assignment China*, and he really kind of digs into the human fabric of Chinese society, partly because of his own experiences in the Peace Corps, as a Peace Corps volunteer, and partly because he was working for *The New Yorker*, which didn't require him to cover breaking news. So he was able to get a degree of nuance and depth and texture that those of us – you know, I was working for a 24-hour news network chasing every headline.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: So we have a mosaic of different kinds of journalists who cover China. You've got print, audio, video. You've got journalists who work on very tight deadlines, like the financial wire reporters. There are the reporters who really need to focus on covering elite politics. There are others, like how you described Peter Hessler, who focus on sort of the texture of society and longer-term trends. That was something I tried to focus on when I was in China, as well as the other more deadline-oriented reporting. The journalists you interviewed for *Assignment China*, they sort of covered the waterfront, in terms of building this bigger picture of China, with everyone contributing something. I mean, to give credit where it's due, there are still journalists in China who are actually doing good reporting on China, foreign journalists. How do you feel about the picture we're getting at the moment?

26:50: **MIKE CHINOY:** You're absolutely right. There's no question that the relatively small number of journalists for the American and other foreign media are doing heroic work under very challenging circumstances. And people are getting out, they're traveling. They're constantly testing the limits. China's a big country. It's got 1.3 billion people. They're not all brainwashed automatons and robots regurgitating Xi Jinping thought 24 hours a day.

Ian Johnson, who worked for *The New York Times*, was one of the people expelled during the wave of expulsions in the early days of COVID, got permission to go back over the summer (of 2023). And he did a fascinating piece in *Foreign Affairs*, I think, where he found all sorts of folks who clearly were not thrilled with the direction the country is going, and are in their own kind of quiet way within the limits that won't get them locked up or in really big trouble, still trying to do things and say things and explore things. That exists. But between the limited numbers and the difficulties of doing it, and the demands of covering day-to-day breaking news in a situation where there's not a day that goes by that there isn't some volley back and forth between the Chinese and the Americans or the Chinese and any number of other countries with whom they are at loggerheads, or speculation now about what's going on in elite politics, with the foreign minister disappearing and the defense minister disappearing and the commanders of the country's rocket force, two of them, disappearing. It means that to be able to sort of go off and spend 10 days in a village in Hubei, and come back and write a really interesting piece about what's going on is extremely hard to do. So without taking anything away from the incredible efforts of the people still on the ground, it's a much more difficult challenge than I would say than at any point since American news bureaus were allowed to set up shop after normalization.

29:00: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So with that in mind, what qualities do you personally think are most important for a China correspondent to have – now, but also what have they been over time?

MIKE CHINOY: Well, a lot of them are the same as for any journalist. You have to have an endless curiosity, a deep interest in and to some degree, I would say, an abiding affection for the place, because the China beat will consume you. It's not something you can sort of turn off. If you have some prior understanding of the history, the politics, the culture and the language, that's very important. You need the same quality of any journalist, to be able to go on no sleep and a lot of caffeine and put up with a lot of stress. I think now you have to have an increasingly tough constitution, because of the amount of things that are going to be aimed at you by the powers that be. I'm not talking about being beaten up, but the frequency with which you'll get called in, denounced, threatened, warned that your visa will be revoked.

So it's very challenging. But the flip side is, there is no more important story than China. I mean, it's the fate of 1.3 billion people. How China interacts with the rest of the world is going to shape the rest of the world in so many ways that it can't be ignored just because it's difficult.

30:38: But I think one thing that concerns me is given the difficulties and access, you're seeing fewer people studying Chinese at American universities. You're seeing fewer people who can envision a career in China. And so people who go into the China field, some of whom might end up in journalism, are coming at it much more from a sort of national security, China threat perspective, because that's what's the big theme now, whereas in the '80s and '90s and early 2000s, it was the China boom.

There's nothing in principle wrong with that. It's a valid issue and a real concern. But again, it's the lens through which China is viewed. If it's increasingly that, then it's another contributing factor towards the diminution of the emphasis on sort of China as a living, breathing society full of real human beings, as opposed to just American adversaries. And I think that's something that's unfortunate for news consumers and it's unfortunate for China as well.

31:40: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. You just touched on a number of things that were very interesting, but one of them is how the story of China is framed. And it has been framed in different ways over time by different generations of journalists. Actually in the '90s when I was first there, there was still something of a heavy focus on human rights, human rights and trade and the tension there. And then it started being more about the China boom, and about China becoming increasingly part of the world.

And I think there is a tendency, not just in China correspondents, but just in the world in general of seeing things as being linear. Like, it's going in this direction, it's going to keep going in this direction. And China has a way of continuing to surprise people with unexpected shifts, where if you look back, you can see that there were points of data that weren't necessarily being connected in a way that showed what was coming, but that it was there. And I'm just wondering, as we're looking at this moment, it feels like a fairly tense, difficult time, but then it kind of felt that way before your first trip to China.

32:50: **MIKE CHINOY:** Well, I mean, if you go back further, the Chinese were our friends and allies in World War II. Then it was the Communists, the Red Menace, the Blue Ants coming over the hills in the Korean War. Then they were Cold War allies against the Soviets. Then they were going capitalist. Then they were the Butchers of Beijing after Tiananmen Square. Then they were sort of Going Capitalist 2.0 turbocharged, with the implication that they're going to be like us. Of course, that didn't happen. They kind of went their own way. Then it's China as emerging superpower. And now with Xi Jinping having reversed a lot of the policies that were critical to the success of the boom, and having undone a lot of the attempts at sort of modifying the way the political system operated to prevent the emergence of another Mao-like all-powerful figure, you have China as the Red Menace again.

So it's an odd way that it's almost come full circle. And I think, it's more complicated than that. Even at the worst times, it's not 100 percent black. There are multiple shades of gray in there. But I think, at the moment, the prevailing dynamic, which is fueled largely by the behavior of the Chinese government, to which the world is reacting, has been very negative. And I think the Chinese would, of course, say that this is an American attempt to block China's rise. And I think today, that's not an inaccurate view of what the Biden Administration has been trying to do. But the reality is that it was the U. S. that pushed for China to join the WTO, that it was American investment that helped get the China boom going. So the notion that the U. S. has a long track record trying to block China's rise, I think is nonsense. It's China's own external behavior and internal behavior that's triggered this response. But I think the upshot is we're in a very dark period.

35:00: And a lot of people that I talk to always ask, you know, about the sort of the political position of a news organization. What was CNN – I think I worked for almost 25 years at CNN — what was CNN's position on this? What's *The New York Times* position? The reality is that apart from an editorial page in a newspaper, there is no position. And the field reporter out in the field has a great deal of leeway, as you know, having done it for a long time as well. You get up every morning, you look for something that's interesting, that tells you something about the place that you're at that the people who are reading or watching or listening would find intriguing.

But that being said, the climate, the broader climate in which editorial decisions are made, judgments about what kind of stories editors want, how the headlines are written, are shaped by the prevailing political climate. And the prevailing political climate now is US-China tensions, and could it get worse?

35:55: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So certainly it was my experience that as a correspondent on the ground, almost all of the story ideas came from me – probably the same for you. I think for most correspondents, that a good editor will recognize, you're there. You're living and breathing this stuff. What are you seeing that's changing. What are you seeing that matters?

You interviewed more than 100 American journalists or journalists working for American media. Over time,

the sorts of understandings and conceptions or preconceptions, misconceptions, that journalists brought into their experience in China, would perhaps shape the sorts of stories they saw or the things they saw on the ground. I'm wondering, as you talked to journalists about their experiences in China, how much were you hearing, "once I was there, checking my assumptions against reality, that I recognized there was a different kind of thing going on here, or it was more complicated."

37:00: **MIKE CHINOY:** It's an interesting question. I mean, certainly in the '50s and '60s, the Cold War was the sort of dominant framework that everybody operated in. And you couldn't get into China, except for extremely rare occasions, and China itself was going through all of this craziness, like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and so on. I think in the '70s, especially, and in the very early '80s, when the doors really first opened, there was this kind of, "wow, we can see what it's really like, as opposed to being at a distance." So I think there was a period when of kind of discovery. "This is what they want. This is what their aspirations are and so on." Once that wore off, I think people, first of all, kind of came back to earth in the sense that, once you realize that, yes, the Chinese were all human like us, but they were in a political system that was not at all like us, repression and so on, that in the early '90s, as the country itself, while still politically repressive, was beginning to shift to getting the economy going again, especially after Deng Xiaoping's famous southern tour in 1992, which kick-started the boom. Then, I think, there was an element of, if you're sitting outside of China, you're looking at endless replays of the image of the man in front of the tank from Tiananmen Square crackdown. But you get on the ground and you discover there's business and there's investment and there's growth, and people are pursuing personal opportunity. And there were Chinese punk rock groups, and there were all of these things going on. And my guess is if you could get beyond the official restrictions today, you might have another one of those moments, where it's not all Chinese gearing up to go to war with the United States over Taiwan or to take over Asia or whatever. It's just Chinese doing their thing in a million different ways.

(Music)

38:30: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Chinese are still doing their thing in a million different ways. It's not the easiest time to cover it all right now. Over the past decade, but it's also not the hardest, and correspondents on the ground there are finding ways to do it.

JOHN RUWITCH: So as journalists working in this environment, we're always sort of finding a way in. We were talking about this earlier. There's always a cracked window to sneak in, or there's always a way – or a way to do a version of what you set out to do. Let me put it that way.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: That's John Ruwitch of NPR, who I talked to in August 2023 for an Asia Society Zoom event.

JOHN RUWITCH: The internet has been indispensable. The social media, that is clearly monitored, is where we find a lot of the people we talk to. If there's a bank run, that's the first place we turn to look for folks who were unhappy about the way the bank The whole Urumqi fire protests spread that way. The A4 'revolution', revolution with air quotes around it, spread that way. And that's how a lot of journalists, including us, found folks to talk to. So yes, it's there, it's something that inhibits us to a certain degree, but it's also – as Melinda said, it isn't right or wrong. There are no morals about it. It's a lot of information flying back and forth. And if you tap into those veins of information, it can be very useful.

John's been reporting in China for almost 20 years, starting out with Reuters. When he switched to NPR, in the middle of COVID, he had to wait two and a half years for his new press credentials and visa. Since getting back to China in early 2022, he's done a wide range of stories, political, economic, social, in rural areas and cities, including stories about dissidents and disappeared political figures. He knows that almost half of correspondents who responded to the most recent Foreign Correspondents Club of China survey said they'd faced government interference, and he's certainly faced it himself in the past...:

40:33: **JOHN RUWITCH:** But none of that has happened to me, I have to say, in the past year that I've been reporting in China. Maybe it's just dumb luck – except for lining up interviews with folks who have then backed out of them, because they maybe came under pressure, or realized that they were talking to foreign media and probably shouldn't.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Counterintuitively, John says:

40:50: **JOHN RUWITCH:** I think the geopolitical and political situation, the tightening, has in some ways made especially younger people, almost more interested in talking to us. These are people who were born with more freedoms and rights and a brighter future, in a way, than they have right now. And I've never felt in the near 20-odd years that I've been doing China, I've never felt the place so pessimistic as it is now.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Melinda Liu was on that same Asia Society Northern California panel. Having set up *Newsweek's* bureau in the early '80s, she came back to China in the late '90s and has been based there ever since. She agrees with John about there being a current air of pessimism, both as an overhang from COVID lockdowns, and because life in China has changed – economic growth is slowing, and government control and surveillance is increasing.

41:39: **MELINDA LIU:** Big Brother is a lot bigger now. In the '80s, and even in the '90s, even at the turn of the 2000s, there was an expectation that technology would set us free, break down borders, the internet, and we felt that was game-changing. Our miscalculation was to think that technology had some kind of value system embedded in it, that it was an automatic agent for good values. And that was not the case. Technology is a tool. And anyone can use that tool. You can use it for good, but you can also use it for evil. And so what has happened now is almost a bureaucratization of the government response to journalists, and also to its own people – you know, the fact that it's omnipresent – everything you do, everywhere you go, everyone you see, everything you say. Even just the idea that it's all on record somewhere, I think, is quite inhibiting.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Still, despite the anti-US rhetoric in official Chinese media, despite the very real sense of patriotism or nationalism many Chinese feel, Melinda says she has found in her recent travels to several provinces around China that:

42:50: **MELINDA LIU:** At the grassroots level, there is a deep reservoir of goodwill towards Americans. If you were Joe Blow in America, you might not know that, or it might be counterintuitive. But it is there, and it is strong, and it is still happening.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: John says that he sees one of the goals of the reporting he's doing – is helping Americans understand a complex picture of a country and its people.

JOHN RUWITCH: One of the reasons I switched to NPR is, there is the flow of news, there are the big trends we all have to cover, the economics, the big events, the human rights, all these types of things, but I got into journalism – I grew up in the Midwest. I got into journalism and studied China because I thought China was fascinating, and basically didn't know anything about it. And most Americans don't really know much about it. And so, so far as we can be bridges to tell stories about people in China, and have somebody sitting in St. Louis, Missouri, or Akron, Ohio, or San Francisco, or wherever, who doesn't know anything about China, think 'huh. That's interesting. I can relate to that person,' I think that's an important role.

43:55: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And it has been over much of the time American journalists have covered China. It's the animating spirit in books like Leslie Chang's *Factory Girls*, Peter Hessler's *River Town*, *Oracle Bones*, and *Country Driving*, Philip Pan's *Out of Mao's Shadow*, and Ian Johnson's *Wild Grass*, *The Souls of China*, and *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future*. That's just the beginning – of a long list of books by correspondents that have brought China to life for readers.

Thanks to Mike Chinoy, for being a guest on this episode, and for bringing to life what it's like to be a correspondent in China, through his book and his 15-year-long project *Assignment China*. You can find all 12 documentaries on the website of the University of Southern California's U.S.-China Institute. Just Google "USC" and "Assignment China", and it will come up. All of the audio in this episode of China correspondents of earlier eras is excerpted from those.

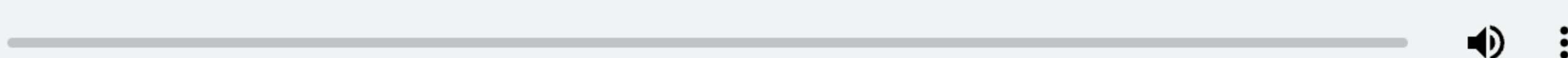
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Thanks for listening. See you next time – every first Tuesday of the month. And meanwhile – happy reading. ■

Audio

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Mary Kay Magistad is deputy director of Asia Society's Center on US-China Relations. An award-winning journalist, she lived and reported in East Asia for more than two decades, including in China for NPR (1995-99) and PRI/BBC's *The World* (2003-13). She has created two critically acclaimed podcasts, *On China's New Silk Road* and *Whose Century Is It?* She is host and producer of the China Books podcast.

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