



HANNA BARCZYK

EXCERPT

## Expulsion

*In early 2020, at the height of China's early Covid epidemic, over a dozen American journalists were expelled from the nation. Where does that leave China coverage today?*

MIKE CHINOY — NOVEMBER 9, 2023

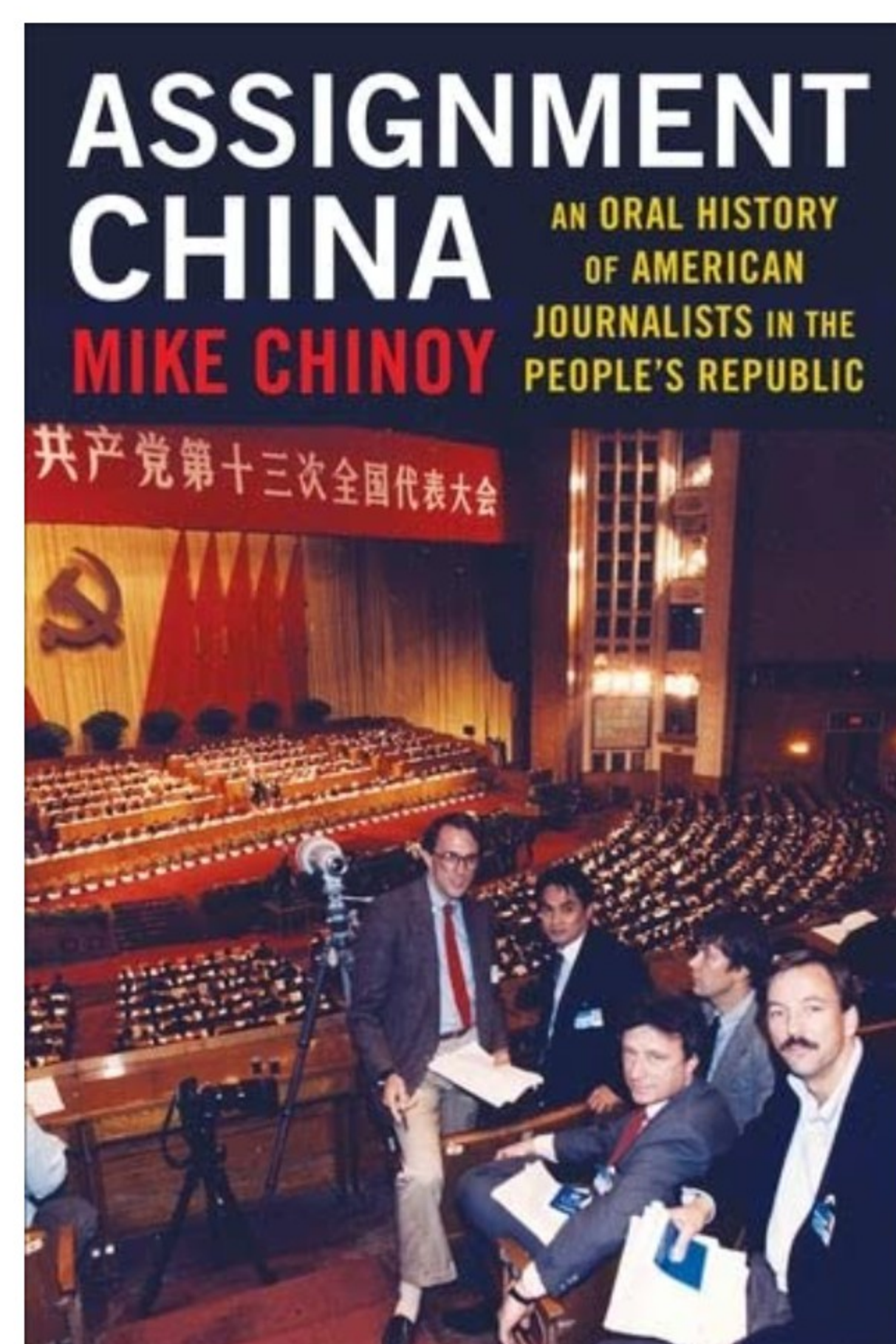
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**Editor's note:** In 2022, former CNN Beijing bureau chief Mike Chinoy reported a 12-part [documentary film series](#) produced by the University of Southern California's U.S.-China Institute. Earlier this year, he published a book to accompany the series, [Assignment China](#), following how journalists have covered China for the American media since 1945, told largely in their own words.

Nowadays, as the *China Books* podcast [noted](#) on Tuesday, reporting on China is exponentially more difficult following the mass expulsion of over a dozen American journalists during the early days of the Covid pandemic in 2020. This revised and edited excerpt tells the behind-the-scenes narrative, in full for the first time, of how that expulsion unfolded during the middle of one of the most important stories to break in the nation.



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When he left Beijing for Wuhan on January 23, 2020, *New York Times* correspondent Chris Buckley, an Australian who had lived in China for nearly 30 years as a reporter for *Reuters* before joining the *Times*, did not expect to be in the city for long.



“Our bureau in Beijing had been vigilant enough that they had collected a few masks,” he told me. “As a precaution, I had taken a few home, so I threw those in my bag, and a shirt and some underwear and socks. That’s essentially what I traveled with, thinking I would be there for a week or so.”

Weeks passed. The lockdown deepened, Covid spread, and Buckley was determined to stay on. The Chinese authorities, however, began urging him to leave.

“This woman from the Wuhan Foreign Affairs Office,” Buckley said, “called a few days into the lockdown, saying: ‘We know you are here. We would really like you to leave. If you want to leave, we can get you back to Beijing.’ She was always both friendly and fretful at the same time. One interpretation of it was they wanted to get press out of the city. And they were worried about foreigners dying on their watch. She would call up with this anxious tone in her voice saying, ‘It’s time to leave. This is your very last chance. I can help you get out of the city today, but after this, you are here. You can’t get out.’”

Amy Qin, Buckley’s colleague at *The New York Times*, was a child of immigrant parents who had grown up in California, then landed a job in the *Times* Beijing bureau focusing on arts and culture. Like Buckley, she had slipped into Wuhan after the lockdown. But when the U.S., Australia, Japan and other foreign governments organized evacuation flights for their nationals trapped in the city, Qin decided to go. One reason was that she had renewed her journalist visa just before the lockdown started, but had been granted only two months. Concerned that she would be stuck in Wuhan when her visa expired, she got on the flight, did two weeks of quarantine in the U.S., then returned to Beijing.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Foreign Ministry was again pressing Chris Buckley to leave.

“The Foreign Ministry people in Beijing began calling,” he said, “with the message ‘Time to get out.’ The fellow who called me regularly was very nice. We always had a good professional relationship. He would deliver these warnings, but it was never enemy sort of style. I could tell he was getting worried, not just about the consequences of having a foreigner fall ill in Wuhan, but also me in particular. I think we were close enough to think of each other as friends. He was quite tearful on some of those calls. Essentially, I said, ‘I’m here. I’m keeping myself safe. I can’t leave the story. It’s my responsibility to be here now. I couldn’t forgive myself if I got on one of those flights.’ And I’d send him these very long WeChat messages explaining that in Chinese, and he would send me an emoticon of somebody crying.”



Chris Buckley of *The New York Times* and Chao Deng of *The Wall Street Journal* leave Wuhan to await expulsion from Beijing (courtesy of Chao Deng)

Buckley persevered, producing increasingly hard-hitting reports. One was a detailed reconstruction, reported with Paul Mozur, who covered the China tech beat, of how the government’s initial handling of the epidemic allowed the virus to take hold. In a February 7 article headlined “As New Coronavirus Spread, China’s Old Habits Delayed Fight,” they [wrote](#):

“



The authorities silenced doctors and others for raising red flags. They played down the dangers to the public, leaving the city's 11 million residents unaware they should protect themselves. Even as cases climbed, officials declared repeatedly that there had likely been no more infections. By not moving aggressively to warn the public and medical professionals, public health experts say, the Chinese government lost one of its best chances to keep the disease from becoming an epidemic.

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“Those investigative pieces took a lot of work,” Buckley commented, “just going through documents on procedures for reporting on SARS-like corona cases, and what you should do, and figuring out what the system was, and why it had failed. Full credit both to the domestic Chinese press, which uncovered some of these problems early on, but also to our researchers in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, who were doing mighty work as well.”

The authorities were furious. A week after the story ran, the state-affiliated tabloid *Global Times* [denounced](#) Buckley in a commentary with the headline “*The New York Times* and Chris Buckley Misrepresent China’s Efforts to Defeat the Coronavirus.”

“The criticisms they mounted were so fragile,” Buckley noted. “The fact is that so many of the things we had reported had been reported by parts of the Chinese media as well. I just thought, ‘Who cares? If they are criticizing me for coronavirus coverage, that is a hard message to sell to the wider Chinese public.’ I thought they just tripped themselves up again.”

“ “ The Foreign Ministry people in Beijing began calling with the message ‘Time to get out’ ”

— *Chris Buckley*

On February 3, *The Wall Street Journal* had published an [opinion piece](#) by Walter Russell Mead, a professor at Bard College, titled “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia.” This term had previously been used to describe China at a time of national weakness and foreign domination in the late 19th century, a period described in Chinese history books as the “century of humiliation.” The headline sparked a [furious response](#) in Chinese state media and was also [objected to](#) by *Journal* staffers.

“When the headline hit,” recalled *Journal* correspondent Josh Chin, who is half Chinese and grew up in Utah, “it immediately struck me as tasteless. I remember thinking this might be a problem. We had reporters and researchers who kept encountering sources who would bring it up. In some cases, they were encountering a lot of real anger. Then the *Global Times* wrote about it and stirred up more anger. Then the Foreign Ministry started bringing it up. It was clear there was some kind of campaign to use this to pressure us. I think a lot of the anger was real. It’s not hard to understand why people would find the headline offensive in the middle of a pandemic.”

On February 19, the Chinese Foreign Ministry [announced](#) that Chin and two other *Journal* reporters, Australian Philip Wen and Chinese-born American citizen Chao Deng, were being expelled. The Foreign Ministry spokesman declared: “The Chinese people do not welcome media that publish racist statements and smear China with malicious attacks.”



Chao Deng received the news in Wuhan, where, like Chris Buckley, she had stayed after slipping into the city following the lockdown. “I remember that moment,” she told me. “It was very painful. I was really upset. I was coming back from this amazing interview with this lady who lived near Huanan Market. She was one of the earliest known Covid patients. Josh called me. I was still sort of giddy from my interview. You know how it is. A reporter tells their editor what they’ve got. Then Josh broke the news. I remember he said, ‘They dropped a nuclear bomb on us.’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ Then he told us. I was just in shock. I couldn’t really process it.”

Despite its distaste for mainstream U.S. media, the Trump administration, which had adopted an increasingly harsh line toward Beijing as Covid spread and the November 2020 U.S. presidential election approached, denounced the expulsion of the three *Journal* correspondents and threatened retaliation. Soon after, the administration [announced](#) that it would reduce, from 160 to 100, the number of visas for Chinese journalists allowed to work in the U.S. for state-run Chinese news organizations, forcing 60 Chinese reporters to leave.

“It’s an old debate about reciprocity,” commented Josh Chin, “whether the U.S. government should take a harder line towards all these Chinese journalists in the U.S., given the way the Chinese Communist Party restricts foreign reporters in China. For the longest time, the prevailing argument was that the U.S. has freedom of speech. How do you justify restricting Chinese journalists if one of your core principles is freedom of speech? Until Trump, that argument ended up prevailing.”

On March 17, Beijing retaliated.

“I had fallen asleep on the couch that night,” Amy Qin of *The New York Times* recalled, “and I woke up and had a ton of text messages, and I looked, and it was like, ‘Oh fuck.’”

Qin discovered she was one of more than a dozen reporters from *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* who were being [expelled](#). It was the Chinese government’s most sweeping attempts in years to intimidate international media, punish those whose reporting the Communist Party disliked, and ensure that the Party would control the narrative.

The Chinese [announcement](#) said that all U.S. citizens working for the three papers whose credentials expired in 2020 would have to turn in their press cards and leave. Moreover, they were barred from going to Hong Kong, long a base for watching China outside the mainland.

“I had no sense it was coming,” *The New York Times*’ Steven Lee Myers said. “My partner had checked her phone and woke me up. I was like, ‘Shit. This means I have ten days to leave China.’ It was in the middle of a pandemic, and it was right when all the borders started to close everywhere.”





Gerry Shih leaving *The Washington Post* Beijing bureau for the last time (Gerry Shih)

According to Gerry Shih, a Stanford graduate reporting for *The Washington Post*, “It definitely came as a shock. I remember staying up all night on my porch drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes with my partner, trying to figure out what we were going to do next.”

Others expelled included five more reporters for *The Wall Street Journal*, and four others from *The New York Times*, including Paul Mozur and the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Ian Johnson. Those ordered to leave were also among those covering human rights abuses against Uighurs in Xinjiang, as well as the Covid outbreak. More than half were ethnic Chinese. Many of them felt the Trump administration’s crudely confrontational approach

had provided Beijing with an excuse to do something it had long wanted to do.

“It was one of the Trump administration’s own goals,” according to Ian Johnson. “The Chinese can say, ‘Look, you kicked out 60 of ours. We’re just kicking out a small number of yours. We are being reasonable.’ And yet they managed in one fell swoop to just about obliterate the sort of deep reporting that could be done in China.”

The primary targets of the expulsions were the three U.S. media organizations with the reporters and the money to do real investigative journalism in China. While other bureaus had first-class journalists, the pressures of daily news coverage meant that in general only the *Journal*, the *Times*, and the *Post* had the resources and staff to go beyond the headlines. Reporters for American TV networks, such as CNN, CNBC and CBS, were not expelled.

“We questioned why that was so,” recalled Ramy Inocencio of CBS. “The investigative resources that *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have, with their ability to dive super deep and do these long-form things I think made them bigger targets than CBS or ABC or NPR. If they were going to target folks, it would be the people who were the biggest thorns in their sides.”

“[China] got the better part of the deal,” said Gerry Shih, “in terms of getting rid of a bunch of pesky reporters who just did more revelatory stuff, potentially embarrassing stuff, than the Chinese journalists in America.”

To make matters worse, along with the journalist expulsions, many local assistants working for U.S. news bureaus were forced by the Foreign Ministry’s Diplomatic Service Bureau — which handled local staffing for foreign media outlets — to quit their jobs.

“The Diplomatic Services Bureau suddenly called in one of our researchers and she was told to resign and don’t tell them anything,” Steven Lee Myers remembered. “Then they called in another one and said the same thing. Of course, by this time I knew about it. And we were raising hell with the Foreign Ministry and the Diplomatic Service Bureau. The DSB just stopped responding to us. Then they fired our office manager, who was not involved in journalism at all. Her job was to manage the bureau budget and expenses. So we lost three of our Chinese staff at the same time. It was obviously all part of an orchestrated campaign against us.”



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— Ian Johnson

**B**efore leaving China, Paul Mozur decided to make one more reporting trip, to Anhui province.

“We were trying to talk to people about a positive story,” he said. “How China beat Covid, what it feels like to have done two months of hard lockdown and reengage again. But there are ten secret police following us around, deliberately disrupting our interviews. Every time we go to talk to a shopkeeper or a person in a restaurant, police would walk up and immediately whisper in their ear, and they say, ‘Oh, sorry, it’s not convenient for me to talk.’ So the last bit of my reporting trip was spent kind of messing with the police, using the tricks I had learned — like hop on the subway, go one station, hop off, and get on the train going the other way. Each time they lose half their people because they have to have one person on and one person off — or jump off and jump back on. So mess with them to the point where we had like one person following us. We tried to lose them in a park but failed. But it didn’t matter because what the hell were we going to do anyway? So that was the final reporting trip for me.”

By now, Chris Buckley had been in Wuhan for more than two months. His visa had expired in late February. Unable to leave the city because of the lockdown, he was told by the authorities to stop working.

“I actually did keep working,” he said. “It’s just that my name didn’t appear on stories. I was keeping busy, partly for mental therapy because, apart from anything else, people know that if you are quarantined, you go nuts if you don’t have anything to do.”

Despite the expulsions, Buckley hoped he might be allowed to remain in China.

“If I had been a cold-headed rationalist about my chances of staying in China at that point,” he said, “I knew they were pretty slim. But I always was hopeful that the Chinese Foreign Ministry would see the error of its ways and let me stay. I was still thinking, ‘If I can get back to Beijing, work it a little — we have had our bad patches over the past year or two, but we can get past that. Just give me a couple of months.’ That was my thinking. I was colossally delusional. At that point, someone at the Foreign Ministry called me and said, ‘Here is what is going to happen. Cases are going down in Wuhan. They are going to start opening the city. When it does, you are going to leave. You are going to go into a quarantine in Beijing. You are going to have a few days to prepare, and then you have to leave.’”

In mid-April, after 76 days under lockdown, Chris Buckley returned to Beijing. In early May, with his wife and daughter, he left China for Australia. The day before his departure, he did an interview with Bill Birtles, the Beijing correspondent for Australian TV. Four men followed, filming him as he headed to the interview. When Buckley tried to talk to them, they ran away.

With the American press corps decimated, China’s campaign against foreign journalists escalated. In September 2020, Bill Birtles and a Shanghai-based colleague, Mike Smith of the *Australian Financial Review*, negotiated their safe departure from China after being sought by Chinese police, who wanted to question them about Cheng Lei, an Australian-



Chinese anchor for CGTN who had just been [detained](#) on vague national security grounds. At the end of 2020, Haze Fan, a Chinese national working as a news assistant for Bloomberg, was also [detained](#) for “endangering national security”. And in March 2021, BBC correspondent John Sudworth, who had angered the authorities with his reporting about Xinjiang, [left](#) on short notice in the face of a growing campaign of intimidation in the state-run Chinese media, as well as threats of legal action against him.

The dramatic reduction of American and other foreign journalists left in China fits into a broader effort by Beijing to shape the narrative about the nation, not only at home but around the world.

Ian Johnson eventually relocated to New York. “They used to accept foreign journalists as part of the cost of doing business in the modern world,” he observed. “You’ve got to take your lumps. You have to allow those pesky foreign journalists in. You’ve got to let them write what they want. That’s all begun to end. They just began to not accept critical reporting.”

*The Wall Street Journal’s* Josh Chin is now based in Seoul. “There is this risk,” he said, “that coverage of China is going to become more polarized and less nuanced, because you have fewer people to tell the human story about China. It’s become almost impossible to write a story about China that is about people. Now, everyone is stuck outside of China doing stories that are much more driven by political and economic conflict, because those are the stories you can write.”



Josh Chin of *The Wall Street Journal* in Urumqi, Xinjiang, 2017 (courtesy of Josh Chin)

*The Washington Post’s* Gerry Shih initially moved to Taiwan. “All the essentially positive stories about slices of life, that’s all gone out the window,” he noted. “I can’t describe what life in China is like from Taiwan.” His colleague Chao Deng, who also went first to Taipei, added: “I am so pessimistic and worried that our readers are going to get a very one-dimensional view of China.”

“It really feels to me like the door is closing on China,” said Steven Lee Myers of *The New York Times*, from Seoul. “There was once a time long ago when the door was closed, and we were kind of peeking in windows and looking over the fence. We essentially covered China from outside. In my case, that’s what I’m doing again. It’s not at the North Korea level, and hopefully it doesn’t ever get there, but it feels like it is going in that direction.”

From Mao’s victory in 1949 until the U.S. and China re-established diplomatic relations in 1978, generations of China watchers had looked at the nation from across a closed border. They stationed in Hong Kong. They relied on reports from refugees. They read official media. And they went on rare, tightly controlled [visits](#) to figure out what was happening behind the curtain. Half a century later, this expulsion of journalists has created a strange sense of history repeating itself. ■

*Adapted from [Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People’s Republic](#) (Columbia University Press, March 2023). Copyright (c) 2023, Michael Chinoy. Used by arrangement with the Publisher. All rights reserved.*

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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.

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