



NICHOLAS KRISTOF

EXCERPT

How Little We Knew

Nicholas Kristof and his wife were the sole New York Times correspondents in Beijing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his memoirs, he reflects on what they got right — and wrong.

NICHOLAS KRISTOF — NOVEMBER 14, 2024

MEMOIR



The *New York Times* bureau chief's apartment in Beijing was a large, well-bugged suite in Building Seven of a guarded government-run compound called Jianguomenwai, reserved for foreign diplomats and journalists. Jianguomenwai was the kind of soulless compound that Communist governments were good at erecting, but it was comfortable, quiet and air-conditioned. Within the paper, it was often said that the correspondent you wanted to follow in any bureau was John Burns. While John was a superb correspondent, the main reason was that he negotiated with New York to get lovely homes or refurbish old ones, acquire beautiful furniture and hire helpful staff. Wherever you were in the world — Kabul, Baghdad, Delhi — if you found particularly fine *Times* lodgings, you could guess that John had been there. Once when I visited John's bureau in Islamabad, I was very impressed by a local man he had hired; a few years later, he was Pakistan's ambassador to the United States and issued me a visa after the country's intelligence agency banned me.

When Sheryl WuDunn and I arrived in 1988, newly married, fresh from language study in Taiwan, we were fortunate that John had been in Beijing a couple of years before us, until he took a motorcycle trip through a remote area. The Chinese authorities arrested him, accused him of spying and after a brief imprisonment expelled him from the country. The Chinese government said that John had been reporting in a closed military area and was taking suspicious photos. This was monstrously unfair to John, who had informed the Foreign Ministry of his route in advance. Three years later, in 1989, a senior Chinese official gave John a formal apology and attributed his arrest to false charges concocted by “bad elements” in State Security. My understanding is that China had arrested John in retaliation for the defection of a senior State Security official to the United States.



Kristof in his Beijing office for *The New York Times*, c.1990. He wrote on a computer, but transmitted articles by a telex machine in the corner.

China’s unfair treatment of John Burns was compounded by the *Times*’s unfair treatment of him. At the time John was expelled, the United States was swooning over China, and there was a good deal of unfair tut-tutting about John provoking China by visiting a closed area. The *Times* didn’t stand four-square behind John as it should have, and it sentenced him to the Canada bureau — then the paper’s equivalent of Siberia.

Sheryl and I appreciated the work that John had done setting up the apartment in Beijing, by merging two smaller apartments, bringing in nice furniture and hiring a full-time live-in Filipina housekeeper — all paid for by the *Times*. But creature comforts couldn’t insulate us from a dictatorial state. The People’s Armed Police guarded the entrances to our compound and blocked Chinese citizens from entering. This became tricky with people like Sheryl who were of Chinese extraction but had foreign nationality. Sometimes the guards would try to block Sheryl from entering our compound, and sometimes they would look at her clothes and self-assuredness and judge that she was probably a foreigner. But Chinese citizens themselves were learning that if they showed enough self-confidence they could pretend to be foreigners and march by the guards as well — or, if challenged, could send the guards retreating by saying a few words in English or else in Chinese with a fake foreign accent.

“ Creature comforts couldn’t insulate us from a dictatorial state. The People’s Armed Police guarded the entrances to our compound and blocked Chinese citizens from entering. ”

We knew our apartment was bugged, partly because one of our Chinese friends worked part-time for State Security translating conversations in our building. Our building had a special floor where the State Security bugging teams worked; we could see them whenever shifts changed. During our brief overlap, our predecessor, Ed Gargan, pointed to an opening with wire mesh over it high in the entrance corridor of our new home.

“There’s a camera in there,” Gargan told us. “And some of the bugs are in there.”

That wire mesh angered me; it felt like an insult whenever I passed it. It was an invasion of our privacy. A couple of weeks later I was on a ladder hanging posters nearby, and the irritation reached a breaking point.

“Sheryl, hand me a flashlight,” I said. “Let’s see if we can see through the mesh.”

Both of us perched precariously on the ladder as we tried to glimpse what was inside. It looked like a cubbyhole the size of a shoebox, with some suspicious gadgetry inside.

“What do you think?” I whispered in Sheryl’s ear. “Should we knock out the mesh?”

Sheryl went to retrieve a hammer. I used it to smash the mesh, and we stared with wonder at the interior. There were no cameras, but the cubbyhole was indeed filled with electronics. We shone the light at one particularly suspicious object and I was thrilled that I could read and understand the Chinese characters for “electronic sound carrying device.”

We had found a bug! Sheryl and I, having read spy novels, retreated to the bathroom, turned on the shower and faucets, and in whispers debated what we should do. Should we replace the mesh and ignore the bug? Should we smash it? Or should we leave it in place and use it as our private disinformation channel to the Chinese authorities? We settled on the third option and were discussing what kind of disinformation to transmit to State Security when a friend arrived at the front door. That’s when we learned what an “electronic sound carrying device” actually is in Chinese.

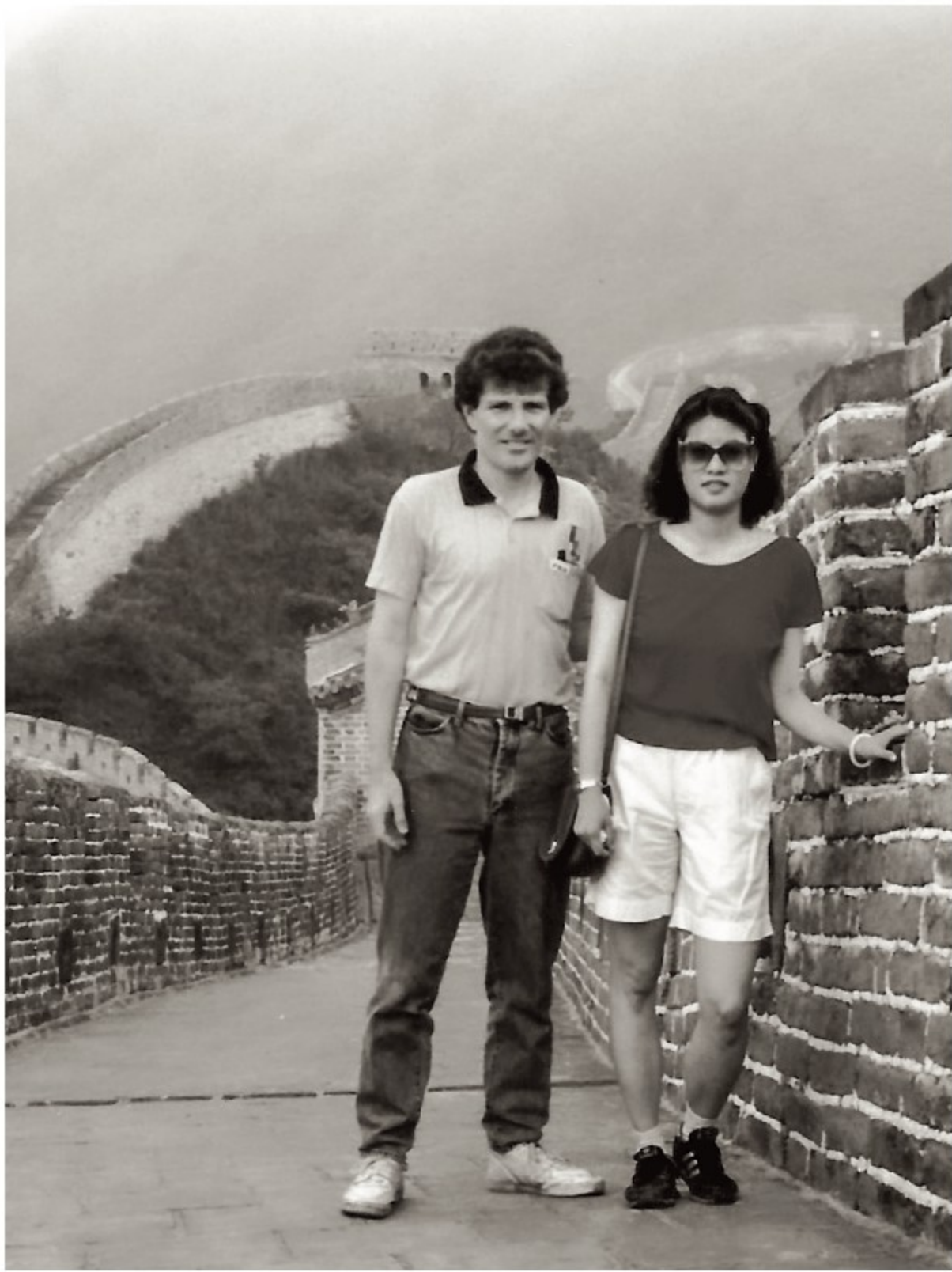
It’s a doorbell buzzer.

We were deflated, but it was a useful lesson in humility, a reminder that for all our presumption in explaining China to the world, we had little idea what was going on around us — and that any time we were too full of ourselves, too cocky about our analytical triumphs, we were probably about to learn that the world is more complicated than it seems. China is a vast country with multiple languages and dialects, in which people are reluctant to speak freely, and even the country’s leaders seemed to have little idea what was going on in the provinces.

“When Dad goes on a provincial visit, he sends his drivers and guards out to talk to people, because he knows the officials will lie to him,” the son of a Politburo member told us. We befriended a number of children of current or former Politburo members, partly because they felt protected: State Security was reluctant to tangle with a Politburo member’s family. On at least one occasion, State Security detained the daughter of a senior official after she left our apartment, and it was the State Security officials who were chastised for overstepping their bounds. It helped that Sheryl was Chinese American, for the authorities were more tolerant about Chinese citizens socializing with an ethnic Chinese journalist who held a foreign passport.

“ “ We had found a bug! Sheryl and I, having read spy novels, retreated to the bathroom, turned on the shower and faucets, and in whispers debated what we should do. ” ”

It was the *Times's* foreign editor, Joe Lelyveld, having offered me the China position, who hired Sheryl as a second correspondent in China, putting her on a contract to write from China — and marking a major step in the *Times's* path toward more respectful treatment of spouses. Some other editors scoffed that now every wife would want to be a correspondent, and others complained that now a single couple would decide coverage of the world's most populous nation in their pillow talk. But skeptics were silenced when Sheryl proved a first-rate journalist who brought new depth to economic and business coverage of China. Initially, though, we had trouble getting Sheryl accredited by the Chinese authorities. The government didn't want any news organization to have more than one correspondent in Beijing, and it was Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, publisher of the *Times*, who solved that conundrum.



Nicholas and Sheryl WuDunn on the Great Wall, c. 1989, when tourists were scarce.

“Apply for Sheryl to represent not *The New York Times*, but a separate entity called *The New York Times News Service*,” he suggested. “That way the Chinese get another news organization they can boast about, and it makes no difference to us whether she's accredited to the *Times* or to the news service.” That worked perfectly.

In retrospect, it seems absurd to have only two people responsible for covering more than a billion people at a turning point in their history, not to mention responsibility for also covering Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, plus occasional duty farther afield if a crisis erupted in, say, Afghanistan or the Philippines. But at the time it was seen as a recognition of China's significance: Previously, the paper had had only a single correspondent in all China.

China was still perceived as a backwater. The *Times* sent its most experienced correspondents to London, Paris, Tokyo and a few other places deemed important, but it was willing to take a chance on a couple of 20-somethings like ourselves to cover the world's most populous country. We threw ourselves into that absurdity. We lived, breathed and dreamed in Chinese, and one high-level contact led to another. After a lunch with Wu Jinglian, a top government economist, I offered him a lift to wherever he was going next.

“Thanks,” he said. “I'm going to Zhongnanhai.”

So I drove him to Zhongnanhai, the walled Communist Party leadership compound, which foreigners were rarely allowed to enter. Neither of us knew what would happen when we got to the gate. But Wu showed his pass, and the flummoxed guards waved us in.

“ In retrospect, it seems absurd to have only two people responsible for covering more than a billion people at a turning point in their history. ”

One of our dearest friends was Zhang Hanzhi, who had been Chairman Mao's English teacher, a senior Foreign Ministry official and the wife of the foreign minister. Zhang was extraordinarily charming, still beautiful in her late fifties, graying a bit, with perfect English, wry humor and a tremendous network that allowed her to pick up the most scandalous stories about Communist Party hardliners. She was quick with funny stories of Mao's sexual conquests and the soap opera of life in Zhongnanhai. She now lived in a beautiful imperial courtyard home, where we could visit her and leave State Security and the rest of Beijing on the other side of her high garden walls. I think we reminded her of her daughter, Hung Huang, who was our age and was then living in New York (Huang later moved back to Beijing and became a cherished friend as well).

Zhang Hanzhi had enjoyed great privilege in China in the Mao period, but after his death she had spent two years under house arrest, encouraged to take her own life. Her guards brought her scissors one day, rope the next. But Zhang was a fighter, and her range of experience left her with a sense of nuance about China that few others had.

I once asked Zhang about her late husband, Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, who had served in the 1970s. He was a Maoist who gave hardline speeches, and I couldn't understand how she had ever seen eye-to-eye with him.

"He didn't himself believe the things he said," she told us. "By the end of his life, he saw clearly that it wasn't working. But what could he do? Of course he couldn't admit it to anyone but me."

The gap between official rhetoric and reality was widening, largely because of corruption. One of our friends, a Politburo member's son, was paid \$400,000 a year for serving on a corporate board, with no responsibilities. The company calculated that it could then bully local governments into handing over valuable land, which it would then develop at a huge profit. After all, no mayor or county executive wanted to risk antagonizing a Politburo member.

Because Sheryl was often mistaken for a local Chinese, we sometimes gained unexpected insights into what ordinary citizens had to put up with. Our friends once took us to a dance party for senior officials, with lots of alcohol. Wang Qishan, a future leader in his own right, was there along with many others. I was chatting with officials and didn't pay much attention as a cabinet minister, Lin Hanxiong, invited Sheryl to dance. He assumed she was local Chinese eye candy, for after leading her onto the dance floor he drew her into a tight embrace and wouldn't let her wriggle out. We knew that senior party officials sometimes assaulted Chinese women, but being groped by a cabinet minister was not an experience Sheryl had anticipated. I was oblivious to what was going on, but Sheryl, never a wallflower, was up to the challenge.

"Do you know who I am?" Sheryl asked Minister Lin in Chinese.

"I'm an American." She paused and her voice rose: "AND I'M A REPORTER FOR *THE NEW YORK TIMES!*"

Minister Lin released her as if she were a red-hot poker. Afterward, we spread the word about what had happened, and he was soon fired for "society problems," often a euphemism for sexual misconduct.

For all the corruption, there was a great deal to admire both about China and about the Chinese. We became close to young reformers who had given up promising jobs in the West to return and build their country. They were so smart and so dedicated. I figured that once the dogmatic octogenarians died off, China would become more pragmatic, more capitalist and more democratic. Most of my friends thought so, too.

I took on a role as interviewer of Chinese high school students applying to Harvard, and I was dazzled by the caliber of the applicants. The SAT was not offered in China, so instead they took the GRE, intended for applicants to graduate school. And as 17-year-olds, in an unfamiliar language and without access to test tutoring, they routinely scored in the 98th or 99th percentile.

The conventional wisdom among China-watchers was that the population was too busy getting rich to worry about politics or to protest, but Sheryl and I weren't so sure about that. One activist I admired was Ren Wanding, an earnest accountant who was a pioneer of the human rights movement in China — and he ended up behind bars. After his release from four years in prison, an enterprising reporter from the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong found Ren, who agreed to give an interview but on condition that the interview also run in the *Times*. The *Post* reporter brought me in. I got credit for outstanding reporting when in fact I was simply riding the reputation of the *Times*.

Ren told us how in prison he had refused to write self-criticism. Instead, he wrote a four-volume treatise on human rights with the only materials he could find, toilet paper and the nib of a discarded pen. The warden responded by keeping him in prison for an extra year, after his sentence expired, because of his “bad attitude.” But Ren continued to call for free elections and respect for human rights.

“I went through some very frightening experiences,” he said, leaning forward in his chair and peering earnestly at me through his thick glasses. “But China has no democracy and no human rights, and its living standard is too low. These are even more frightening.” I asked him what would happen to his wife and 12-year-old daughter if he spoke up. “I already died once,” he said, referring to his imprisonment. “So now there is nothing to fear.”

“ “ What convinced us to move was exhaustion at being constantly tailed and fear of getting Chinese friends in trouble. ” ”

We spent five years in Beijing, witnessing the Tiananmen Square protests, massacre and their aftermath, before leaving China in 1993. For all our distress when friends were imprisoned and tortured, it was also obvious that there was another side to the country. Education standards were soaring, and the government was showing an impressive commitment to building high schools and universities and to improving the caliber of

CHASING HOPE

A REPORTER'S LIFE

NICHOLAS D.
KRISTOF

Two-Time Winner of the Pulitzer Prize
and Coauthor of HALF THE SKY



[Buy the book >](#)

teaching. I'm a strong believer that the best predictor of where a country will be in 25 years is its education system, and it was difficult not to be dazzled by China's progress there.

More broadly, China also managed its economy well. Its day-to-day leaders were engineers and problem-solvers who were pragmatic and forward-thinking in handling routine challenges. We could see the results. China lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and raised more people from illiteracy than any country ever. Health standards were rising quickly, so that today a newborn in Beijing has a longer life expectancy than a newborn in Washington, D.C.

Sheryl and I covered the economic boom, but I wondered sometimes if we focused enough on it. The repression was real, particularly the cruelty and cultural genocide toward Muslims in Xinjiang, but so was the explosion of wealth and economic and educational opportunity. Families in Gansu and Ningxia that had been living in caves got houses or apartments, villages got electricity, and leprosy was eliminated as a public health threat.

Lu Lin, a dissident who spent six years in prison after a journalist friend was found with papers that incriminated him, became a clothing trader because no other job was open to an ex-convict. But traders thrived in the free market and booming economy, and Lu Lin was very good at what he did. He kept his retail stalls in the markets but moved into the wholesale clothing business, opened a branch office in Moscow and began exploring opportunities to do business in the United States. I contrasted his economic success with the struggles of some of my old friends in rural Oregon, and I began to wonder what made the difference. Attitudes? Drive? Opportunities?



Interviewing dissident workers by candlelight in Beijing on a return trip to China, c.2006. (Du Bin)

We debated how long to stay in China. *Times* correspondents typically remain in one location for three to five years, and we were approaching five years. There would be openings soon in both Moscow and Tokyo, and it seemed we could claim either. But there was also a good argument for staying in China indefinitely. We were well sourced and spoke Chinese, and we both felt that the most important story in the world was the rise of China. What convinced us to move was exhaustion at being constantly tailed and fear of getting Chinese friends in trouble. We had managed to avoid getting any of our sources sent to prison, but we didn't know how long we could keep that up. After much discussion, we told Joe Lelyveld we wanted to transfer to the Tokyo bureau.

We weren't sure it was the right call, but soon afterward the Chinese authorities raided the offices of *The Washington Post*, searching the safe, notebooks and papers of its correspondent, Lena Sun. While Lena was not herself arrested, China did arrest two of her best Chinese friends, Bai Weiji and his wife, Zhao Lei. The authorities sentenced Bai to prison for ten years for supplying documents to Lena, and Zhao was sentenced to six years. With no one to care for their baby daughter, Melanie, the girl was almost put in an orphanage; at one point, Zhao asked Lena to adopt Melanie. In the end, a family member cared for the girl.

That news devastated us. That could have happened to our friends. Yes, it was time to leave China.

Those five years in China were transformative for me. Seeing an army fire on its own people on June 3-4, 1989, changed me, and the experience of being constantly tailed left an indelible imprint on my psyche. Living in China was a chance to witness an economic revolution that hugely empowered hundreds of millions of people, but it was also a reminder that principles rarely defeat machine guns. Time and again after Tiananmen, from the Arab Spring to Myanmar, I heard variations of “the people united will never be defeated.” Take it from me, it’s not true.

That said, in the words of the Chinese writer Lu Xun, “Lies written in ink can never disguise facts written in blood.” In my mind’s eye, daydreaming about some day in the future, I envision a new statue at Tiananmen Square commemorating the pro-democracy protesters.

China helped shape my belief in purpose-driven journalism that exposes injustice. In recent years in the United States, as democracy has struggled, as some elected leaders and television pundits seemed more committed to undermining democratic government than to preserving it, I’ve thought often about those Chinese who risked everything in their failed bid for greater democracy.

It’s sometimes difficult to know how to navigate our responsibilities as people are massacred or as democracy is attacked. But journalism does not operate in a vacuum. It can be harnessed to some larger vision that gives it meaning, and — particularly since Tiananmen — that’s what I’ve aspired to do. That kind of journalism is messy to pull off in practice, though, and I haven’t always gotten it right. ■

Adapted from [Chasing Hope: A Reporter’s Life](#) by Nicholas D. Kristof (Knopf, May 2024). Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Copyright © 2024 by Nicholas D. Kristof.

Header: Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn at Tiananmen Square, 1989. All images courtesy of Nicholas Kristof/Knopf.



Nicholas Kristof is a [columnist](#) for *The New York Times* and a best-selling author. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes: with his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, in 1990 for covering China’s democracy movement and crackdown, and in 2006 for covering the Darfur genocide. He lives on the [family farm](#) in Oregon and in his free time turns his grapes and apples into fine [wine](#) and hard [cider](#).