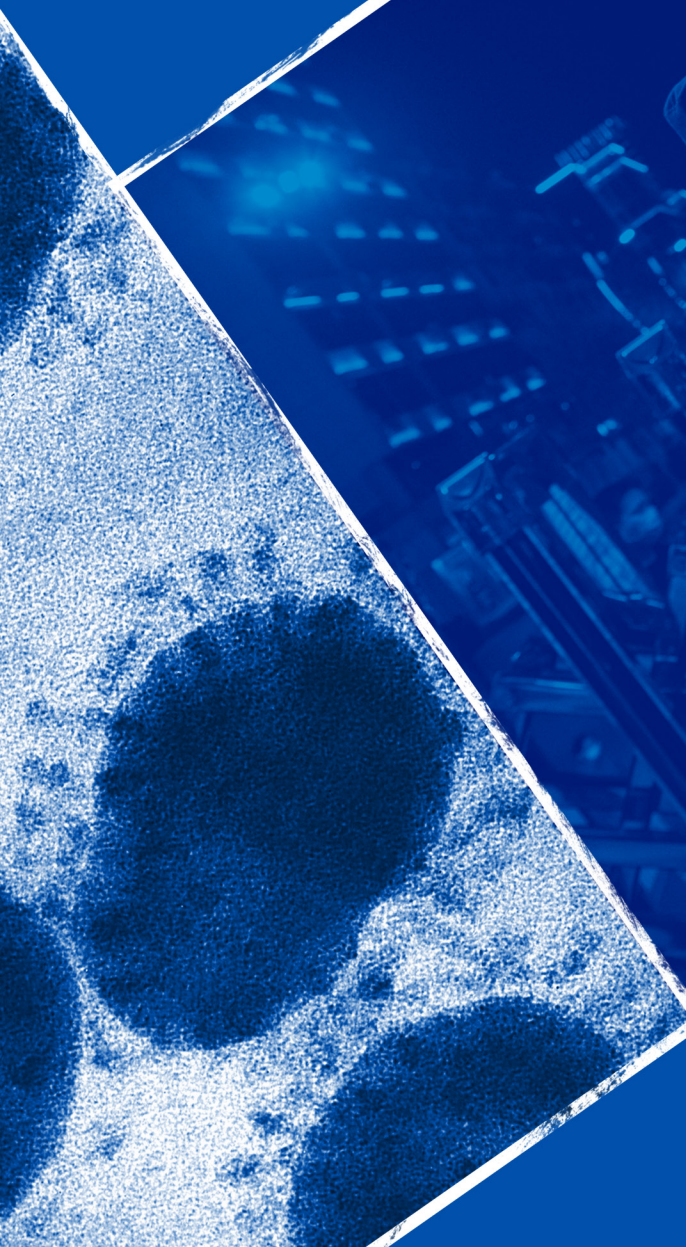


TRACK EXPERIENCE

REPORTING ON CHINA AMID A PANDEMIC



Foreign Correspondents'
Club of China 2020
Annual Report

TRACK TRACE EXPULSION

REPORTING ON CHINA AMID A PANDEMIC



FCCC REPORT ON MEDIA FREEDOM IN 2020

Chinese authorities dramatically stepped up efforts in 2020 to frustrate the work of foreign correspondents. All arms of state power – including surveillance systems introduced to curb coronavirus – were used to harass and intimidate journalists, their Chinese colleagues, and those whom the foreign press sought to interview.

For the third consecutive year, not a single correspondent said working conditions improved, in response to an annual survey conducted by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China.

Foreign correspondents were targeted in alleged national security investigations and told they could not leave the country. China cancelled press credentials and refused to renew visas, resulting in the largest expulsion of foreign journalists since the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre more than three decades ago.

In the first half of 2020, China expelled at least 18 foreign journalists from the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. Correspondents affected included American and Australian journalists, some of whom were given 10 days to leave the country. Visas became a tit-for-tat fight, as the U.S. government capped visa numbers for Chinese journalists in America, leading to the departure of scores of Chinese, many of whom worked for state media.

"Expulsions are the biggest concrete operational hit," said Jonathan Cheng, China bureau chief for the Wall Street Journal. "I began this job with fifteen reporters and was looking to expand our bureau. Now we are down to four on the ground in mainland China."

Chinese nationals working for foreign media faced increasing pressure, with authorities forcing them into regular interrogations, compelling their resignations, and in the worst cases, throwing them in long-term detention.

"Despite what China says about wanting to be open to the world and to show everybody what a vibrant society it is, they clearly restrict reporting of anything that doesn't adhere to their vision," said Steven Lee Myers, Beijing bureau chief for the New York Times, who was expelled in March 2020. "It's suggestive of a climate that's not going to get any better."

In the second half of the year, Chinese state security officers visited the homes of Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Bill Birtles in Beijing and the Australian Financial Review's Michael Smith in Shanghai.

The officers informed the correspondents that they were barred from leaving China and ordered them to submit to questioning in connection with an alleged national security investigation into Cheng Lei. Cheng, an Australian journalist for Chinese state broadcaster CGTN, was detained by the authorities last August.

A diplomatic standoff ensued, with Birtles and Smith sheltering in the Australian embassy in Beijing and consulate in Shanghai, while high-level negotiations took place between Australia and China over five days.

The journalists were finally allowed to depart China after agreeing to be interrogated. Cheng was formally arrested this February 2021 for allegedly supplying state secrets overseas. Chinese authorities have provided almost no information about her case.

Had Birtles and Smith remained in China after being questioned, "it's unclear whether we would have been locked up or not," said Smith.

"But the fact that the Chinese authorities were willing to put exit bans on two foreign correspondents does show that the old precedents no longer apply," he said. "Before this happened, we assumed that as foreign correspondents, the worst-case scenario was we would be deported or have our visas revoked."

Involving foreign journalists "in a national security case is unprecedented," said Birtles. While the distressing incident occurred as relations deteriorated between Australia and China, it was intimidation presented "as a legitimate investigation involving midnight knocks on the door and taped interrogations."

As a result of this incident, Australian news organizations no longer have any correspondents based in China. The Australian Financial Review has begun planning the establishment of a bureau elsewhere in Asia.

Another alarming escalation occurred in December when Haze Fan, a Chinese national working for Bloomberg News, was detained, also on alleged national security grounds. As in the case of Cheng, Chinese authorities have released virtually no information regarding her situation. Both remain in detention.

All of these events took place against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. As China's propaganda machine struggled to regain control of the narrative around this public health disaster, foreign press outlets were repeatedly obstructed in their attempts to cover the pandemic.

China has used the pandemic as yet another way to control journalists. New surveillance systems and strict controls on movement – implemented for public health reasons – have been used to limit foreign journalists. On many occasions, correspondents were forced to abandon reporting trips after being told to leave or be quarantined on the spot.

Correspondents have also been required to comply with restrictions that did not apply to other people, whether Chinese or foreign, such as testing requirements.

"We're trying to do stories that matter," said a senior editor at a Western media organization. "At the same time, I would say there's no story worth getting one of our people locked up for. We're just being much more careful about what we ask people to do, and listening to any concerns."

Then, China deployed a new tactic in its longstanding practice of weaponizing visas.

Since September 2020, Chinese authorities have refused to issue new press cards to correspondents accredited with U.S. news organizations. Instead, journalists have been handed letters and granted residence permits of two to three months at a time. Those left in this limbo without formal press credentials include journalists from Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the U.K. and the U.S.

Authorities have also used restricted-term visas for other media to punish journalists whose reporting they disliked. At least 13 correspondents received press credentials valid for six months or less, including as short as one month. Some of those journalists were also later expelled. This is a form of harassment as it means endless rounds of paperwork and government appointments, and limits ability to travel. Resident journalist visas are typically one year in length.

Outlets affected included the BBC, Economist, Globe and Mail, Le Monde, New York Times, Sankei Shimbun, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Telegraph, Times, Voice of America and Wall Street Journal.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its embassies, and official state media have also significantly stepped up attacks against specific journalists and organizations.

Foreign correspondents have seen their work distorted and misrepresented, or attacked with fabricated charges, including baseless allegations that people interviewed by foreign news outlets were actors paid by foreign intelligence services.

China is gearing up to host the Winter Olympic Games in February 2022, a time when journalists, athletes and spectators from all over the world are expected to gather in Beijing.

The FCCC is extremely disappointed to note this rapid decline in media freedom in China, and more broadly, freedom of speech, in direct contrast to longstanding Olympic values of excellence, respect and friendship.

"I've been surprised at the levels of intimidation and harassment this year, particularly on any story relating to the coronavirus, a matter of huge international interest," said a journalist with a U.K.-based news organization.

"On numerous reporting trips, we've been constantly followed by up to a dozen unmarked cars. We've been harassed, threatened, stopped from gathering material, denied entry to hotels, and then, on return to Beijing, hauled into the Chinese foreign ministry and accused of being the ones at fault," he said. "In short, it's been off the scale this year."

- IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS -

The coronavirus pandemic allowed China an opportunity to create more restrictions for foreign press in the name of public health.

Authorities cited health concerns to deny access for foreign journalists to certain areas, notably in Xinjiang, even though they remained open to other people, both foreign and Chinese. Significant pressure was exerted on foreign journalists and sources seeking to report on the pandemic itself.

In some cases, government officials and police gave journalists a choice: Leave instantly, or be quarantined for at least 14 days. In other cases, journalists were forced to take repeated Covid-19 tests, a delay tactic to prevent them from working.

Sources, including medical staff and people whose relatives died in Wuhan, have been interrogated by police, local officials and other authorities about their interactions with foreign media -- or warned not to agree to interviews. Wuhan is the city where infections emerged late 2019. ¹

On March 28, 2020, China closed its borders to all holders of existing visas, but later reinstated travel privileges for most foreigners, category by category. The one group that remains barred from travelling in and out of China is foreign journalists. A significant number of journalists remain locked out of the country.

Journalists with valid credentials hoping to return to China have had to obtain special permission on a case-by-case basis. Some have been granted these approvals, while others have not, underscoring how access to China for foreign correspondents is, even more than usual, entirely subject to the whims of the Chinese authorities.

Respondents described exchanges during this approval process in which Chinese authorities hinted that permission to return hinged on more favorable coverage of China. Chinese government propaganda claiming that the coronavirus originated abroad and was brought into China – a way to deflect public anger over its early mistakes – has been remarkably successful.

As a result, fears that foreigners pose dangerous health risks have subjected correspondents to a growing xenophobia, making it more challenging for them to live and work in China.

The introduction of mandatory coronavirus checkpoints and contact tracing apps have created additional opportunities for Chinese authorities to gather data and surveil foreign journalists and their sources.

- **21%** of respondents said they were locked out of China because of the coronavirus-related travel ban imposed on foreigners on March 28, 2020.

I left China in the spring [2020] for a family emergency, knowing that there would be difficulties coming back. I had to apply for an entry visa to be able to return, which was given to me after approximately 6 weeks. The Chinese embassy in my home country used this opportunity to call me in. During this talk, Chinese diplomats said they were worried that by my journalistic work, that I was potentially ruining relations between China and my home country. They also asked me to "write more positive stories about China," since, as they said "it otherwise would be hard" to still call me "an objective journalist" in case their "colleagues in Beijing" would ask them for their opinion about my work. -Journalist for a European news outlet

¹ For further details, please refer to the section on pressure and threats against Chinese colleagues and sources.

After coming back to China from abroad I tested positive for the coronavirus. During my time in the hospital I continued reporting. At one point MOFA called to tell me they were aware of the situation and were ready to support me, but then they criticized my reports on the conditions inside the hospital and on Chinese vaccines, since those reports had been shared on social media by some Chinese netizens blaming me for not being grateful enough to China. I felt the call was an effort to leverage on my situation and to influence my reporting. -European media

- **42%** of respondents said they were told to leave a place or were denied access for health and safety reasons when they presented no risk
- **17%** of respondents said they fear that tracking apps could be used as a surveillance tool impacted their reporting

In Xinjiang, we had to take three Covid tests over the span of five days – at a hotel the morning after checking in, at a train station upon arrival, and at an airport upon arrival. We never got the results for these tests, which is why we had to keep taking them. Local officials also used Covid as a reason to stop us from reporting in one village. They obstructed us and said we had to take a test, even though we'd just gotten tested 30 minutes earlier at the train station. -Alice Su, Los Angeles Times

I had requested permission to visit and conduct interviews with local officials in a neighboring province but was told it would be "too dangerous" for me to visit as I am a foreigner, even though I made clear I had never left China throughout the pandemic. -Foreign reporter in China

I've had local officials smugly say what a pity it would be if they were to decide I have a fever and needed to be quarantined. And I have heard the same from other colleagues. -Ted Plafker, The Economist

I didn't feel free to travel to certain places and pursue stories because I knew I had to have my phone with me and use the [contact tracing] health app. -U.S. journalist in China

- VISA HARASSMENT -

China has long used journalist visas as weapons in diplomatic spats. In 2020, this affected correspondents from many countries, particularly as tensions worsened between the U.S. and China.

Cycles of retaliation between Beijing and Washington led to the expulsion of at least 18 foreign journalists based in China after their credentials were abruptly cancelled. Dozens of Chinese journalists left the U.S. on short notice, most of them staff at state media outlets.

Chinese authorities then began refusing to renew press cards to all journalists accredited with U.S.-headquartered news organizations, regardless of their nationality.

Instead, they were issued letters and placed on shortened residence permits of two to three months, which in theory allow them the right to work and live in China, but in practice put them in limbo.

Such measures created uncertainty and hassle for journalists, who are often required by Chinese authorities to produce such credentials on reporting trips, to request interviews, and to register for government press conferences.

This impacted journalists from the U.S., U.K., Italy, Japan and New Zealand. Chinese authorities are still declining to grant new press cards to journalists working for the U.S. press.

As I work for an American news outlet, the IPC says they are unable to renew my press card... instead they issued a letter.... During an interview, an IPC official said there are Chinese journalists in the U.S. who are unable to renew their credentials, and that they are watching closely how the U.S. will proceed. They apologetically said this was inevitable due to actions taken by the U.S. side. There is no clarity on when my press card can be renewed. -Correspondent for Western media

A standard press visa in China lasts 12 months. However, one out of four respondents reported that they had received visas valid for less than a year. One out of six correspondents reported being forced to live and work in China on a series of short visas of between one and three months in duration. Some Chinese tourist visas last longer than that.

- 15 of 112 respondents received press credentials of 1 to 3 months
- 15 of the respondents received press credentials of 4 to 11 months

I received seven consecutive one-month visas, followed by a three-month visa. -Nathan VanderKlippe, the Globe and Mail

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also dramatically slowed the granting of new credentials to journalists seeking to begin assignments in China, attributing this to the coronavirus pandemic.

Most applications from Western news media have been subject to extensive delays, with little clarity on when they might be approved. News organizations whose correspondents were expelled have not been granted visas for new journalists to be based in China. Only a very small number of new journalist visas have been granted, primarily to non-Western news organizations.

Some journalists have now waited more than a year, and several organizations have multiple applications outstanding.

- 60% of respondents are aware of colleagues being denied or having an unusually delayed J-1 resident journalist visa

I left China in August. The two colleagues who are going to replace me applied for their visas in December 2019. They had a meeting in the Chinese embassy in Paris in January 2020, and the embassy gave them the necessary approval to be granted a visa by Beijing authorities. But since then, they still haven't gotten their visas. -Antoine Védeilhé, France 24

We have a number of journalists who have been waiting months (the longest is one year) for their J-1 visas to join AFP here in mainland China, with the excuse being the Covid situation. -Helen Roxburgh, Agence France-Presse

The Economist submitted two J-1 visa requests for correspondent positions in 2020, including one in January of that year. We have had no movement on either of them, and at various moments MOFA have said the visa system is frozen and linked those delays to Covid-19. -David Rennie, The Economist

Even for people who had visas approved prior to the pandemic, Chinese authorities showed a new willingness to erect obstacles for those whose prior coverage they disliked.

As in previous years, some correspondents said they received threats from the authorities of losing their press credentials during the renewal process.

Those threats became more extreme this year. One correspondent was told she “should have been expelled.” Another was warned they could be subject to legal action or sanctions, including the cancellation of a bureau license.

We were told we had violated regulations, statements were issued attacking our journalism, and numerous threats were made of further action, which, it was made clear, could include expulsion. -Correspondent with U.K. media

Renewing journalist credentials in China is a two-step process. First, correspondents must apply at MOFA for a renewed press card, which allows them to work as a journalist in China. Then, correspondents surrender their passports to the police – the Public Security Bureau’s Exit and Entry Administration – to receive a residence permit, which allows them to live in-country.

In 2020, correspondents reported problems with both steps of that process.

To start, MOFA frequently delayed the provision of a press card until the day the card was due to expire. This created considerable pressure for journalists, as some have family members’ visas linked to theirs.

Providing new credentials at the eleventh hour meant some correspondents packed their belongings and reserved flights – which have been harder to book given reduced pandemic schedules – in case their renewal applications were denied.

- **55%** of respondents said press card renewal took more than 7 working days, MOFA’s stated period for issuing new cards

I received my new press card only two days before my and my family’s visas expired. This, even though we handed in everything several weeks in advance. We received no answer as to why authorities delayed the procedure. We were just asked to wait.

-Western television correspondent

Numerous delays in issuing new press cards, which were routinely delivered on the day of expiry – in at least one case, not until the afternoon of expiry day.

-Nathan VanderKlippe, the Globe and Mail

Correspondents reported further difficulties in booking appointments at the Exit and Entry Administration.

It took about 14 days to get my passport back from Exit-Entry. They kept delaying and sent the police twice to check where I lived. Once, to see whether I lived in the given address, and a week later, allegedly to confirm whether my toddler also lived in the same place – although they had also met him during the first visit. -French news service

I had more difficulty than usual making an Exit-Entry bureau appointment. I could not reach the regular officer who would handle my case and calls to the generic line for residence permit renewals would not be answered. -Correspondent for Southeast Asian media outlet

During the roughly two-week period passports are surrendered to the Exit-Entry bureau, correspondents are issued temporary yellow paper slips that are not routinely recognized by other entities in China, including the police, banks, and hotels.

Since December 2019, I've had a total of six new visas in my passport...which accounts for a huge amount of hassle over a 13 month period. Time lost in administration, for example, and the impact on travel or banking by being repeatedly without a passport during the renewals. -John Sudworth, BBC News

Because of Covid-related unclarities at the local level, and mixed experiences in previous years with the yellow slip, we decided to only pursue day trips and not stay overnight in hotels. -Dutch journalist

I had to receive a money transfer from my Italian bank account and I couldn't get it until I had my passport back. -Giulia Marchi, photojournalist for LUZ

- CHINA'S INCREASING 'RED LINES' -

Correspondents, though limited in their ability to travel this year given coronavirus constraints, experienced harassment when reporting in regions deemed sensitive by the Chinese government.

Many journalists faced restrictions or were prohibited from working in a number of regions in China, including:

- **All 18** respondents who tried to report in Xinjiang
- **6** of the **8** respondents who tried to report from Tibetan-inhabited areas, such as Sichuan or Gansu
 - **16** of the **19** respondents who tried to report from Inner Mongolia
- **8** of the **13** respondents who tried to report from industrial areas, such as steel-producing regions
 - **3** of the **5** respondents who tried to report from China's border with southeast Asian countries

REPORTING ON XINJIANG

Harassment of journalists was especially intense in Xinjiang, where correspondents were visibly followed by police or state security agents, asked to delete data from their devices, and prevented from talking to people.

Twelve journalists who visited Xinjiang in 2020 responded to detailed questions about their visit. Of these:

- **All 12** were visibly followed, denied access to public places, or asked or forced to delete photographs and other data from devices
 - **7** were told prior permission was required to report
 - **4** had interviews visibly monitored
 - **4** had interviews disrupted
 - **3** were denied a hotel room
 - **2** were detained or had a colleague detained
 - **2** received visa-related threats
 - **1** experienced threats or retaliation against interviewees/sources

Our team was subjected to persistent surveillance, obstruction and harassment. We were forced to delete footage by local police officers on two separate occasions. We were stopped and turned back at checkpoints and continuously followed by unmarked cars. We were filmed and photographed by people who were following us but never identified themselves. - Yvonne Murray, RTÉ

*Followed from airports on arrival. Shoved and grabbed by people who refused to identify themselves. Placed under such close surveillance that interviews were impossible.
-Nathan VanderKlippe, the Globe and Mail*

Three hotels withdrew their confirmation shortly before check-in despite a previous clearly stated confirmation to accept foreigners. In one case, this was enforced by two external affairs government officers, who forced us to drive 250 kilometers to Kashgar in the middle of the night. -Correspondent for a German publication

For some correspondents, Xinjiang-related pressure continued after leaving the region. In Beijing, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – which holds the authority to issue or refuse credentials to foreign correspondents – regularly summons foreign journalists to meetings in which officials criticize journalism that does not comport with official narratives.

- 2 of the journalists who went to Xinjiang were subsequently summoned to a meeting at MOFA

*I was called from several phone numbers in Xinjiang in the days after my reporting trip (I did not pick up). A few weeks after my trip, a PSB officer in Beijing called me. He said that he was in front of my apartment and asked me whether I had been to Urumqi.
-Reporter with a European broadcaster*

REPORTING ON INNER MONGOLIA

Egregious harassment occurred in 2020 when foreign journalists travelled to cover large-scale boycotts staged by ethnic Mongolian parents and students protesting a new school curriculum that would scale back the use of the Mongolian language in favor of Mandarin.

*I was surrounded by plainclothes men in front of a school where I was talking to parents. They took me to a police station where another man in plainclothes took me to a back building with two rooms, one for interrogation with a chair that had cuffs for the wrists and ankles and another one that was a cell with floor-to-ceiling bars. The man refused to identify himself and demanded to empty my bags and look at my devices. I complied, but kept asking to make a call. I tried to pick up my phone and when I did so, he put his hands on both sides of my neck, pushed me into the cell, and locked the door.
-Alice Su, Los Angeles Times*

Interview subjects were threatened and detained for speaking to foreign journalists.

*On a trip to Inner Mongolia, I was manhandled and dragged into a facility where I was held in detention for 1.5 hours before agreeing to leave the region.
-Mathias Boelinger, German TV correspondent*

My driver was interrogated in a grocery store so I could not hear what they were asking him. In the end, government officials allowed him to take me back to the airport, during which he motioned with his hands to indicate his body had been bugged with a microphone to record any conversation. -Emily Feng, NPR

I was doing a cultural Christmas feature about China's Ewenki, a small minority group who traditionally lived as hunters and reindeer herders. But it was almost impossible to get time alone with interviewees, one of whom was interrogated and detained by the authorities for more than a day after we met him. In another village, anytime we talked to someone or entered their house, they would immediately get a call and a visit from the authorities to make sure they didn't talk to us. We were denied hotel rooms, followed for all three days by at least 8 minders and a dozen different cars – waiting for us in the lobby, tailing us down tiny, frozen roads. Police also went door to door in a village where we stayed looking for "the foreigners." Plainclothes men followed until we got on our flight to leave. -Sophia Yan, The Telegraph

REPORTING ON HONG KONG

Substantial new challenges emerged in Hong Kong, in large part due to a sweeping national security law imposed by Beijing last June.

While correspondents were effectively barred from travelling to Hong Kong for most of 2020 due to Covid, they continued to be aggressively questioned and criticized by China's foreign ministry over their coverage of the city.

I was asked a lot about my coverage of the Hong Kong protests during my visa interview, and officials specifically wanted to hear my personal opinion regarding the protests. I believe the ongoing protests may have contributed to the delay in processing the visa as well. -Beijing correspondent working for foreign media

The foreign ministry repeatedly mentioned my Hong Kong coverage as problematic during private meetings. They...[had a] prepared statement of their own on how Hong Kong belonged to China and how my coverage along with other English-language reportage was biased and mean-spirited. -American correspondent

Last March, Beijing explicitly said that American reporters at the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post who had been expelled by the authorities from mainland China were banned from working in Hong Kong as well. ²

The New York Times later experienced delays in securing work permits for other employees in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has historically been a haven for those whom Beijing has refused mainland press credentials. Beijing's projection of media sanctions into the region is a clear indication those days are over.

The national security law outlaws broadly defined crimes such as "collusion with foreign forces" and "subversion of state power," which could be easily twisted to describe routine reporting or having contact with foreign media. Foreign correspondents thus experienced an unprecedented chill in communications with longtime sources.

Confronted with safety risks in the wake of the national security law, foreign news operations have had to devise safety protocols for Hong Kong-based sources, employees, and freelancers, limiting the speed and scope of reporting possible there. Such precautions had previously only been necessary in mainland China.

² https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1757128.shtml?from=timeline&isappinstalled=0

Police in Hong Kong have also arrested journalists, including freelancers for foreign news organizations.

I have noticed a distinct change among my contacts after the national security law was introduced. Previously, many people in Hong Kong who would speak to me on the record now either want to be quoted anonymously or refuse to speak to me at all.

-Journalist with a British print outlet

The situation in Hong Kong does not bode well for the overall situation, and it has impacted our ability to not only book guests on shows, but also our stringers are very concerned about their safety and what actions authorities might take against them for doing their work – reporting on news and developments and providing analysis and commentary. **-Journalist for Western news outlet**

REPORTING ON TIBET

Access to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is restricted for foreign journalists, who must apply for permission from the Chinese government to visit.

China's State Council and Ministry of Foreign Affairs on occasion arrange government-supervised trips to TAR itself, but carefully choose which journalists and organizations are allowed to participate.

Despite American legislation passed in 2018³ demanding reciprocal access to Tibet, U.S. correspondents and U.S. outlets said they were unable to join a state-organized trip whose itinerary included Tibetan-inhabited areas in Qinghai province and one stop in TAR; state organizers told multiple correspondents the tour was "full."

A small number of media organizations selected by Chinese officials participated in a second state-organized trip to TAR later in the year. However, participants said no independent reporting was possible, as the schedule was tightly managed and police followed if journalists tried to visit places on their own.

Our minders in Tibet became very nervous when some foreign media journalists tried to use their drones. They said, "Tibet is a restricted area" when asked why reporters could not fly their drones in Tibet, which does not geofence drones. Our minders said that "you still have to have special permission" to fly drones there." **-Journalist working for foreign media**

- PRESSURE AND THREATS AGAINST CHINESE COLLEAGUES -

Chinese staff employed by international media faced substantial pressure and harassment from authorities in 2020.

Haze Fan, a Chinese journalist for Bloomberg News, was taken by police from her Beijing apartment in December 2020.⁴ Chinese authorities have provided almost no information about her whereabouts and detention, only alluding to suspicion of endangering national security. She has not been formally arrested or charged.

Our annual report showed a steady year-on-year increase in the number of respondents who say their Chinese colleagues have been subject to intimidation.

³<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1872>

⁴<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-11/chinese-authorities-detain-bloomberg-news-beijing-staff-member>

- **59%** of respondents said this happened in 2020, compared to **44%** in 2019 and **43%** in 2018
- **60%** of respondents indicated they had installed more security procedures to support their Chinese colleagues

Our Chinese staff are coming under enormous, deliberate, government-organized pressure, which is becoming much more serious. -European broadcaster

As in past years, Chinese colleagues received calls, sometimes weekly, and were asked to attend regular meetings – at times hostile in nature – during which they were asked about their work and for information regarding their foreign colleagues and news organizations.

Interrogations by state security or police occurred in cities where Chinese staff lived and worked, on reporting trips with foreign correspondents, and also in their hometowns when they returned to visit family.

Authorities also accused them of being unpatriotic and betraying their country. One correspondent reported that a Chinese colleague was named and publicly attacked on social media for working at a foreign news organization.

In many of these interactions, the authorities instructed them not to discuss these meetings with their respective news organizations.

*A Chinese colleague was threatened that if she did not cooperate, "something bad could happen."
- British outlet*

Local policemen or state security told her that she was a traitor to her country, that she should not work with foreigners. When we checked in at hotels, the local police harassed her late at night on the phone asking her why we are here, who are we going to meet...-European TV station

Chinese staff are always the first ones which the authorities try to harass when we are stopped on the road. Our staff have also been detained and questioned for simply doing their jobs. Their families have also been exposed to this. -European broadcast media

A pair of plainclothes Ministry of State Security officials have repeatedly sought out my Chinese colleagues, brought them to a public setting, and asked them about my work, my story plans, who I spent time with and other details of my personal life, as well as my personal opinions on various political issues. -American journalist

Authorities also controlled which Chinese nationals could work for foreign news organizations.

China does not allow foreign media to directly hire Chinese nationals to work in any capacity, for instance as a researcher or translator. They must be formally employed by the Beijing Personnel Service Corporation for Diplomatic Missions, a state-run organization attached to China's MOFA, and seconded to foreign news organizations.

In the past year, the government personnel agency terminated contracts for Chinese nationals working at organizations including CNN, the New York Times and Voice of America – yet another tactic aimed at crippling the work of foreign media.

New hires were placed under greater scrutiny by that agency. Applications took months to process, and prospective candidates were called in for meetings during which they were asked pointed questions regarding their political views and personal lives.

In some instances, the government personnel agency simply never approved Chinese nationals, even for administrative positions that were not journalistic in nature, such as office managers.

Chinese nationals were also required to sign legal documents in order to receive official credentials that they must carry when working. They were not allowed to keep copies of these documents, which assign them personal responsibility for breaches of vaguely-worded regulations governing foreign media in China.

- PRESSURE AND THREATS AGAINST CHINESE SOURCES -

Chinese authorities employed more strategies to prevent people from speaking with foreign journalists, including physically restraining sources or paying them to decline interviews. Consequences were severe for those who interacted with foreign journalists. Sources lost jobs, were denied bank loans, and detained.

As such, interviewees increasingly requested to be quoted or recorded anonymously, only agreed to provide a surname on the record, or censored themselves by limiting remarks or retracting earlier comments.

Sources have cited concerns that being interviewed by foreign media would reflect poorly on them especially as China's relations with the West have deteriorated, and as Beijing has stepped up attacks against the press.

Organizations including the BBC, Wall Street Journal, and Yomiuri Shimbun, have been wrongfully accused by the government and in state media of creating fake news.

- **88%** of respondents had interviews declined because subjects needed prior permission to speak to a foreign journalist or because they were not permitted to speak to foreign journalists at all. This represents an increase from **76%** in 2019
- **Half** of all respondents said they think or were sure an interview was cancelled or withdrawn because of pressure from authorities
- **Nearly 40%** of respondents said they were aware of sources being harassed, detained, called in or questioned as a result of interacting with a foreign journalist. This represents an increase from **25%** in 2019 and **34%** in 2018

The city of Wuhan in particular was a place where journalists' sources were pressured into refusing interviews or harassed after being interviewed. Many organizations reported that family members of medical staff cancelled interviews after being warned at a number of levels – by Party officials, propaganda offices, and employers.

The chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention said he didn't have time to speak to me and hung up when I reached him on his cell phone to discuss viral transmission, but he has been happy to speculate about the coronavirus originating from outside China – repeatedly – in interviews with the Global Times [a state media outlet].

-Correspondent at a U.S. newspaper expelled in March 2020

We set up an interview with a factory worker, arranging to speak with him about his job and financial challenges because of the pandemic. But he didn't show up for our meeting. It later emerged that he'd been detained by the police and forced to resign from his job for agreeing to the interview. Police also paid him not to speak with us, and said he was detained "for an investigation into foreign journalists."

-European media

How can you not encounter this situation these days? The people who've turned down my requests run the gamut, from political scientists and theorists in Shanghai to CDC officials in Beijing to scientists across the country, from ordinary residents in Xinjiang to doctors in Wuhan. Sources in Kazakhstan called to ask me to withdraw their interviews after they were contacted by Chinese police after we spoke.

-Journalist with a Western news outlet

Specifically with Hong Kong people, many of them will not answer some questions over fear that they might incriminate themselves given the National Security Law, including those who have in the past been very outspoken, such as ousted lawmakers and activists.

-U.K. newspaper correspondent

In the very early days of Covid, some academics would still speak to an Asian newspaper like ours, but as time went on, we were very quickly stonewalled. Employees at state-owned enterprises have been increasingly unwilling to meet for meals, much less speak to us.

-Journalist at an Asian news organisation

A salesperson from a luxury store in Beijing even refused to tell us about their customers and the post-epidemic resumption of sales. A subject "too sensitive", he explained to us.

-French radio

Doctors and nurses in Wuhan (contacted through an intermediary) declined interviews because they risked losing their jobs if they would accept. Inhabitants of Wuhan were warned not to accept interviews by foreign media by their local authorities. Sources have been told by authorities that accepting interviews could lead to job loss or their children being barred from entering university. -Dutch newspaper

We did a story about the early rollout of vaccines in China. We spoke to a student who had had the vaccine in Beijing. His quotes were all complimentary, but a few days later he called in tears asking for the name of the hospital and vaccine company to be removed from the story (but not his own name). He said that he and his family were being threatened because of it.

-Correspondent at U.S. media

- HUMAN AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE -

As the number of topics considered by Chinese authorities to be politically sensitive has grown, authorities have ramped up surveillance on journalists and sources, both physically and electronically. Like other industries, the coronavirus pandemic has forced newsrooms around the world to rely on online communications, a security risk hackers have tried to leverage.

- **Nearly half** of respondents say that the fear of surveillance, digital or in person, regularly affected their ability to adequately interview and communicate with sources or carry out their reporting.
 - **40%** of correspondents said they had reason to believe their internet accounts had been targeted in attempted hacks in 2020
 - **87%** of respondents say their WeChat messages (the most common form of online communication in China) are definitely or possibly surveilled by the government.
- **60%** of respondents believed additional coronavirus restrictions were being used to interfere with reporting.
 - **40%** of respondents experienced physical surveillance, such as being followed.
 - **30%** of respondents were forced by authorities to show or delete data on their devices.

SMS verification methods remain a serious vulnerability. China's telecoms carriers are all state-owned, and as such can read text messages – a common way to reset lost passwords allowing hackers to gain access to accounts.

Ten percent of respondents reported receiving text messages with login codes that they had not requested for different platforms, such as messaging apps – a sign that they were being targeted in hacking attempts.

Hackers have attacked Chinese platforms, such as WeChat, and also foreign ones blocked by government censors, such as Twitter. In some cases, Chinese authorities referred to details about stories and correspondents' personal lives using information that they could only have learned via access to their accounts.

I saw my phone activate as if it was remotely controlled. I was using my notes app and my phone suddenly changed on its own to check my reminders, one of which was unfortunately called "Wuhan pitches." -Charles Pellegrin, France 24

*Government officials questioned a colleague about a story we hadn't published yet.
-Journalist at a Western news outlet*

Chinese authorities have sought to restrict reporting on the coronavirus pandemic, particularly from Wuhan, even as cases have subsided.

In Wuhan coverage, and in Beijing in reports that were not supposed to be sensitive, I was forced by locals, with the support of police, to delete data like street footage with no proper explanation. In Wuhan, I was asked to delete footage from my phone by a police officer. The footage was general views of the health controls at the entrance of the compound, from the other side of the street. -Francesc Canals, Televisió de Catalunya (Spanish media)

In August, during another shoot in Wuhan, two men came running to me when they saw that I was filming the seafood market. They were extremely violent and forced me to erase the three shots that I had made from the market. During the same shoot in Wuhan, while I was filming in front of a hospital, police officers intervened and asked me to see the images, but without erasing them. -Antoine Védailhé, on assignment for a documentary project

The biggest consequence of such surveillance is that stories, reporting trips, and interviews at times must be cancelled to protect sources and correspondents. Even simply being connected to a journalist – such as receiving a phone call or being added on social media – can put a source at risk.

I no longer directly call sources on sensitive stories from my phones, because I know that the Ministry of State Security in one Chinese province specifically detained and questioned potential sources after a third party called them and simply mentioned I wanted to talk to them. One source in particular has received threatening MSS calls at least once a week...and told that he will be jailed if any information he provided makes it into international media coverage.

-Emily Feng, NPR

I suspect that sources I interviewed by phone in Inner Mongolia were contacted by police, partly due to the extensive surveillance they are conducting on ethnic Mongols' communications, and partly because others told me it was not safe to contact them anymore via phone calls. Even a few sources I previously messaged on Western social media platforms went cold.

-Correspondent for foreign media

Authorities also intruded into correspondents' personal lives, including physically breaking into their offices, homes, and hotel rooms on reporting trips. Correspondents and their families have even been watched and interrogated by local police when on vacation.

While I was on holiday in Inner Mongolia in May, I was physically followed by several officers in Manzhouli and Hailar. We were banned from staying in hotels, our locked bags were opened and most probably searched while we were outside the hotel room. I took pictures of the gentlemen following us – they very aggressively forced me to delete the pictures.

-Steffen Wurzel, German broadcaster

In October, my wife and I went to Hangzhou. We drove there from Shanghai and booked an AirBnB which did not ask for our passports upon check-in, so there should be no official record from either train/plane nor hotel. But my Chinese colleague got a phone call from State Security asking what I was doing in Hangzhou. **-Correspondent for U.S. media**

While travelling for leisure in Sichuan, local police held me for a day, asked to see my phone and requested that some pictures be deleted. **-Don Weinland, formerly FT in Beijing, now with the Economist in Hong Kong, while waiting for a mainland visa**

Twice this year, there appeared to be unusual efforts to enter our office at night.

-Steven Lee Myers, New York Times

Only one-third of correspondents said the cybersecurity support they received from their organizations met their needs. More than half said that they had general support on cybersecurity, but felt it was not applicable to reporting in China.

- YEAR IN REVIEW: 2020 NOTABLE INCIDENTS -

In January, a journalist with a U.S. news organization was followed by two SUVs while driving through a village on the outskirts of Hotan, Xinjiang. A plainclothes man repeatedly pushed the journalist and grabbed her arms, while asking who she was and why she was taking photos. Over the next hour, minders intimidated her driver into staying, cornering the journalist in the car and demanding that she show photos taken. She was forced to show her phone with photos to at least four local party officials and a couple who falsely claimed she had secretly photographed them, and was followed for the rest of her five-day trip.

The next month, Le Figaro correspondent Sebastien Falletti was reprimanded by an official at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who informed him "how unhappy" she was with two of his stories published in February about Xi Jinping's role in fighting the coronavirus and challenges to China's diplomacy during the epidemic. The official accused Falletti of being biased and taking an anti-China stance, and said that journalists should provide uplifting stories. The conversation ended with a warning that she would "check" his upcoming work. A few days later, an open letter was published on Chinese social media accounts by the spokesperson of the Chinese embassy in Paris, slamming "some kinds of French press" for their "absurd" coverage of China's response to coronavirus, denouncing the "ignorance," "moral decay" and "prejudice" of the journalists, quoting liberally from Falletti's work and other pieces in Le Figaro. The Chinese embassy asked Le Figaro to publish the statement, a request the news organization refused.

In April, a correspondent for a U.K. news organization was accosted by more than a dozen plainclothes people outside a cemetery in Wuhan, who dragged her backwards several meters as she tried to leave. The men grabbed her devices and checked her passport, refusing to return any of the items. Other people, also in plainclothes, claimed she had "illegally" snuck into the cemetery where she spent "hours" taking pictures. As the correspondent had visited for less than 30 minutes, as shown by times marked on a contact tracing form by guards who had let her through, the men tried to force her to change the record to back up their claims, before calling a uniformed police officer to the scene. Some of the men also interrogated her driver.

In May, a correspondent for U.S. media tried to visit caves in Yunnan province where Chinese scientists had previously studied bats infected with close variants of Covid-19. After arriving in Kunming, the correspondent and a Chinese colleague rented a car and drove to the town of Yuxi, where they stayed overnight. The next morning, they found the car had two tires slashed. The following day, their hotel rooms were broken into, and the memory cards on their cameras containing all footage collected of the caves had been destroyed. Plainclothes police were waiting in the lobby as they checked out. At the airport, as the journalists attempted to leave, they were subjected to a detailed search of their belongings, with guards demanding to know the purpose of every item, including scraps of paper and a bar of soap.

In July, at least six foreign journalists were hit in a cyberattack, while covering the closure of the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, which Chinese authorities demanded as tensions escalated between Washington, D.C. and Beijing. At first, the 4G signal for the journalists' mobile phones disappeared, hindering reporting during a breaking news event. They then received a flood of text messages containing password reset codes from different social media accounts. Several correspondents received emailed security alerts about "suspicious activity" on their accounts. One journalist had his WhatsApp de-linked from his phone and his Facebook and Instagram account passwords changed, locking him out of the accounts until he reset them.

Later analysis by the FCCC suggested the attack was an IMSI catcher, in which phones are forced to connect to a fake cell tower. While connected, attackers are able to intercept any SMS messages sent to those phone

numbers, including password reset prompts and two-factor verification codes, which could allow them to gain access to people's social media accounts. The FCCC was unable to identify the entity that perpetrated the attack.

That same month, NPR correspondent Emily Feng was reporting in Shandong province on recent village demolitions when government officials surrounded her and insisted that she had to take a coronavirus test before being allowed to leave. Two uniformed police officers then quickly arrived, along with two others dressed as health workers. They claimed that local regulations, which they had no physical or digital copy of, required Feng to be quarantined and tested because she had travelled from Beijing. Feng showed them her passport, visa, and recent negative test results. Eventually the officers let Feng and her colleague go.

Also in July, a photographer for Agence France-Presse reporting in Jiujiang city on flood control efforts had his hotel room forcibly entered. A lock on his suitcase had been bluntly broken, indicating whoever did so cared little about hiding the attempt. The journalist was followed for the rest of the trip by at least two plainclothes personnel in an unmarked car, both of whom declined to identify themselves and attempted to block him from reporting, citing "safety" issues. The journalist later discovered his laptop had been hacked; a later examination by AFP of the hard drive revealed this had occurred while he had been out reporting, and that over the course of five hours, the hacker had entered at least 40 commands, mostly dealing with logon attempts or security changes. It remains unclear what the perpetrator was looking for, and whether any data was copied or stolen.

In August, a journalist with a Western news outlet in Beijing went to Jiangxi province to cover an industry trade show. On the first day, he was greeted by more than half a dozen local officials, one of whom said they wanted to have the chance to fix any "distortions" in his coverage. Over the rest of the trip, which lasted several days, he was followed on foot and tailed while in a taxi by another car. Minders repeatedly "accidentally" bumped into him. In at least one case, the minders questioned an interviewee.

In September, Alice Su of the Los Angeles Times was surrounded by plainclothes men outside a school in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, who forced her to a police station. Her repeated requests to call the U.S. embassy and China's MOFA in Beijing were denied. When she tried to reach for her phone, an officer put his hands around her throat and locked her in a soundproof cell for an hour. She was subject to multiple interrogations and filmed by an officer's body camera. She was also searched by two women who confiscated her jewelry and watch, and requested her bra be taken off because of the metal wire inside. Hours later, she was released, escorted to the train station, and watched until she got on the train and left the station.

Also in September, a foreign correspondent who tried to report on China's space program in Gansu, was asked to sign a contract before arriving. That contract asked the journalist to guarantee the final story would not have "negative influence" or "malicious remarks" about Gansu and China as a whole, and to agree to make changes when requested by the authorities. The journalist refused, and initial permission to visit the place and report about it was withdrawn.

The next month, George Fahrion of Der Spiegel travelled to Hubei province to meet the family of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, who passed away in February 2020 from the coronavirus he had sought to warn the public about. As Fahrion greeted them in a public square, a group of at least five people in plainclothes approached. One took pictures of them with his smartphone; two showed government badges and requested Fahrion's identification; another questioned what he was doing there; and a fifth took Dr. Li's family aside to speak with them. The family, distraught and sobbing, said they had changed their minds and left.

In December, a Chinese national working for a European broadcaster traveled home because her grandmother was ill. When she arrived, her mother received a phone call from a friend working with the local Communist

Party committee, asking whether her daughter was working on a story about the demolition of people's homes, an issue which she had previously looked into with her foreign journalist colleagues. Later that night, while the family was about to transport her by-then deceased grandmother to a final resting place, the local Party secretary interrogated the Chinese employee about her work. The following day, during the funeral, she was again accosted by another Party official. They asked her to visit the village committee, which told her not to proceed with the story. Other officials involved in the project being investigated by the European broadcaster also contacted her later after she had returned to Beijing, asking to meet over dinner during which they stressed the need to keep them in the loop about stories pursued.

- CONCLUSION -

There is no doubt that these are tumultuous times for the foreign press in China.

The FCCC is very disappointed that media freedoms deteriorated significantly in 2020, and strongly condemns the use of journalists in diplomatic conflicts.

President Xi Jinping himself once said that China "welcomed foreign journalist friends to explore" the country. Xi has also stressed many times that China is open and transparent.

More eyes than ever are trained on China, a rising power whose influence can be felt in every corner of the globe.

China is also slated to host the Winter Olympics in early 2022 – only a year from now.

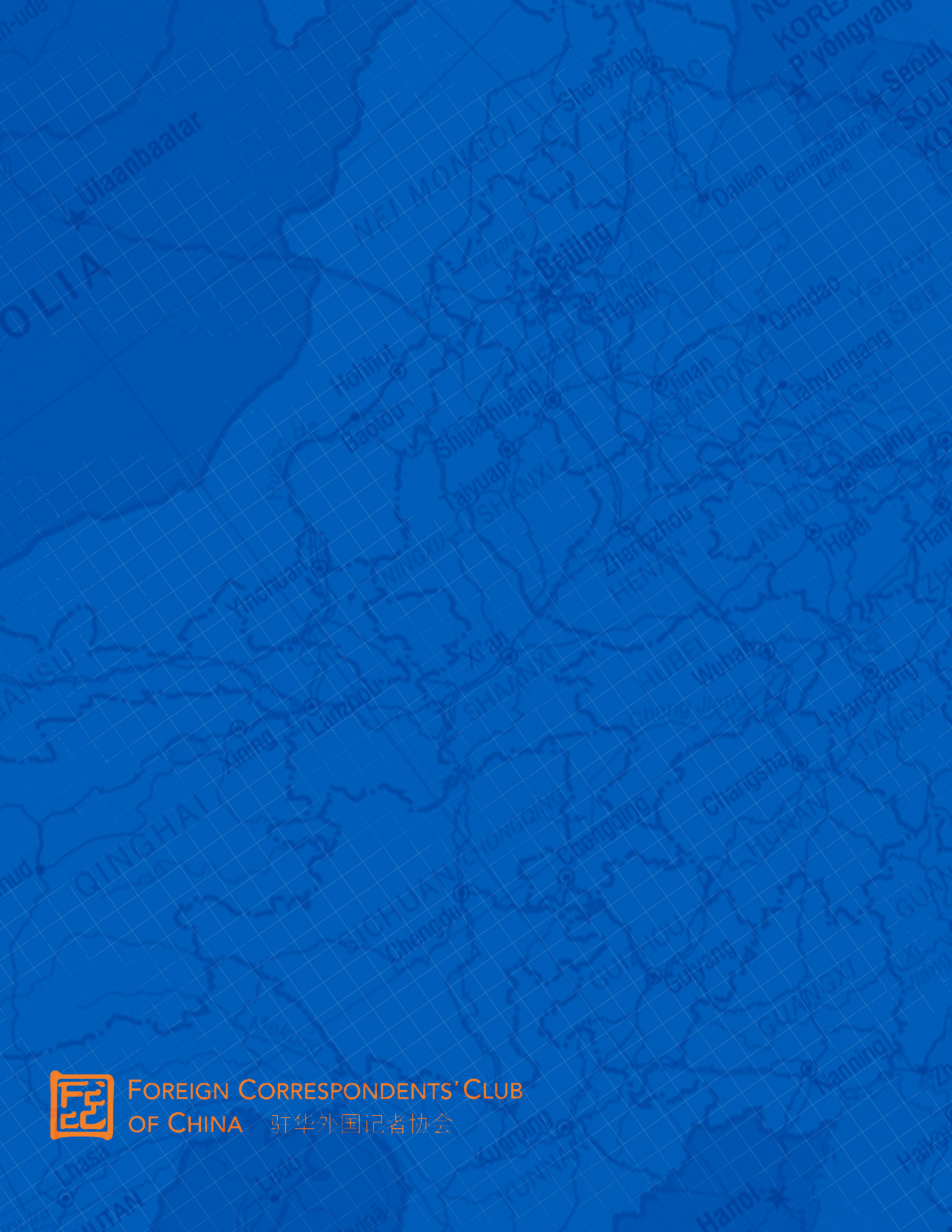
At such a moment, the FCCC urges Chinese authorities to allow foreign journalists to do their jobs – reporting on this extraordinary country.

- SURVEY METHODS -

This report is based on a survey of journalists who belong to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China in Beijing and the Shanghai Foreign Correspondents' Club. Conducted in December 2020, 150 of 220 correspondent members representing news organizations from 30 countries and regions responded to the survey.

Percentages reflect the proportion of responses to a specific question. Not all respondents answered every question. Additional interviews with bureau chiefs at 21 news organizations headquartered in North America, Australia, 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 whose members include correspondents from 30 countries and regions.



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