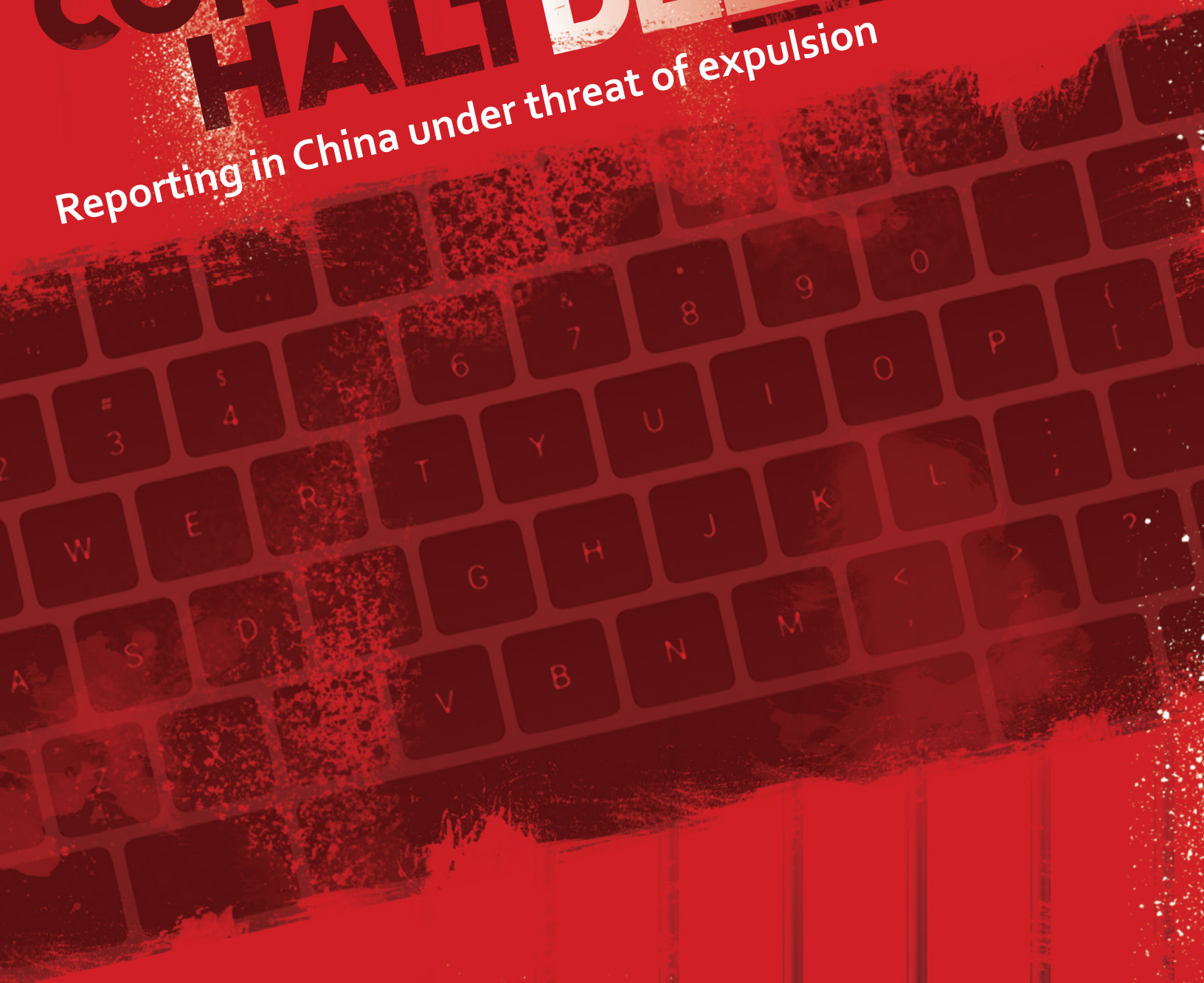


# CONTROL HALT DELETE

Reporting in China under threat of expulsion



# CTARL + HALT + DEL

## FCCC REPORT ON MEDIA FREEDOMS IN 2019

Chinese authorities are using visas as weapons against the foreign press like never before, expanding their deployment of a long-time intimidation tactic as working conditions for foreign journalists in China markedly deteriorated in 2019.

For the second time in as many years, a foreign correspondent was expelled after being denied a visa – the Wall Street Journal’s Chun Han Wong was forced to leave in August. In addition, Chinese authorities issued a record number of severely truncated visas to resident journalists. Also for the second consecutive year, not a single correspondent said conditions improved, in response to an annual survey by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC).

The readiness to use press accreditation as a tool of control appears to have set the stage for further escalation. In February 2020, visas and press credentials for an additional three foreign correspondents – the Wall Street Journal’s Josh Chin, Chao Deng and Philip Wen – were revoked in the biggest group expulsion in three decades.

This amounts to the most brazen attempt in the post-Mao Zedong era to influence foreign news organizations and punish those whose work the Chinese government deems unacceptable. Since 2013, when Xi Jinping’s ascension to power was completed, China has forced out nine foreign journalists, either through outright expulsion or by non-renewal of visas. The FCCC fears that China is preparing to expel more journalists. At the start of 2020, two correspondents received visas of only a single month.

In 2019, at least 12 correspondents received credentials valid for six months or less, more than double the five short-term visas issued the year prior. Resident journalist visas are typically issued for one year.

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

Twenty-two percent of respondents faced difficulty renewing their credentials, up from 13 percent the year before. Almost all of them believed this was related to their reporting.

Expulsions and shortened visas are a “very ominous sign,” said Steven Lee Myers, Beijing bureau chief for the New York Times. The Chinese government’s “desire for control, or their wariness of scrutiny, really gets in the way of the stories China does have to tell.”

Chinese employees at international media organizations – who do a variety of demanding and important work – continued to face intensifying intimidation and harassment, including being detained, interrogated and threatened. Media organizations are going to increasing lengths to protect those employees, including providing hostile environment training and even flying them out of the country on dates China considers sensitive.

An expanding surveillance network in China, which employs facial recognition technology and physical monitoring, has increasingly impeded the work of foreign journalists. Correspondents have gathered evidence that the hacking of email and encrypted messaging apps is being used to frustrate reporting. Fear is pervasive about the monitoring of communications, including from inside journalists’ homes and offices.

We encourage readers to spend time looking through the data and the quotes assembled in this report. Together, they create a detailed picture of sustained attacks by the Chinese state on the foreign press, a worsening reality that should be cause for global concern. As China reaches new heights of economic influence, it has shown a growing willingness to use its considerable state power to suppress factual reporting that does not fit with the global image it seeks to present.

## - KEY HIGHLIGHTS -

- 55% of respondents said working conditions have deteriorated
- 82% of respondents experienced interference, harassment or violence while reporting
- 44% of respondents said their Chinese colleagues encountered harassment at least once
- 43% of respondents said concern over digital and physical surveillance affected their ability to report, conduct interviews and communicate with sources
- 70% of correspondents reported the cancellation or withdrawal of interviews, that they know or believe to be due to actions taken by Chinese authorities

In China, 2019 was a year of banner anniversaries. June 4 marked 30 years since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre – a politically sensitive event the Chinese authorities still have yet to fully acknowledge. October 1 commemorated 70 years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China under the ruling Communist Party – an achievement the Chinese government was excited to celebrate.

Still, FCCC correspondent members encountered obstruction when reporting on both anniversaries, including the harassment of sources, in yet another sign of deteriorating working conditions.

“One of the people I interviewed for our June 4 coverage had planned to leave the country before the anniversary. But he was slapped with an exit ban and questioned about his ‘cooperation’ with foreign media – not just us, but others he talked to, too,” said Anna Fifield, Beijing bureau chief for the Washington Post.

A number of foreign journalists, whose reporting had previously led to complaints from the Chinese government, were unable to obtain press credentials necessary for covering the 70th anniversary events, with Chinese authorities entirely blocking some organizations.

Foreign journalists also faced harassment and intimidation over their coverage of the protests in Hong Kong, including invasive checks on their belongings and equipment while crossing the border. In August, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) even issued a 43-page letter to news outlets about China's stance on the Hong Kong protests in an apparent effort to reframe the narrative, instructing correspondents to refer to the document, which "explained" how to cover the story.

Chinese authorities have attempted to increase their control over foreign news organisations, instructing journalists on what they are and are not allowed to cover.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs now has increasingly explicit conversations with us about 'red lines' that we have crossed, and that if crossed again will trigger unwelcome consequences, whereas before they would be much more vague," said a bureau chief at an English-language news organization.

Authorities have grown increasingly eager to quell unflattering reports about Xi Jinping, the Chinese president.

"'Red lines' for reporting are most often on Xinjiang, Hong Kong, but above all, almost anything written about Xi. MOFA has explicitly said that if we write the wrong pieces about Xi, we will face the anger of other arms of the government, and not just MOFA," the bureau chief said.

As scrutiny is intensifying toward China, it is more important than ever for foreign media to have freedom to report and cover the country. The ability for foreign journalists to be based in China without impediment is crucial for quality international news coverage about the country.

## DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS: WORKING CONDITIONS

### VISA HARASSMENT

Foreign journalists applying for visa renewals face numerous challenges, with a record number of at least 12 correspondents receiving visas of six months or less. This creates much uncertainty for journalists.

- **22%** of respondents say they faced difficulties with government bureaus and offices when renewing their visas and press credentials
- **21%** of respondents say there were indications the difficulties were related to reporting
- **25%** of respondents say they received visas of less than 12 months, the typical duration for government-issued credentials

*My renewed press card was not delivered until the day my previous card expired. I had booked a ticket out of China, not knowing whether it would be renewed. -**Nathan VanderKlippe, Globe and Mail***

*I've been given press cards of seriously curtailed validity, one 6-month and two 3-month cards. And the renewals have been long, drawn out affairs, often taking four weeks or more. It was made clear that visas are a sovereign matter and they don't have to renew. -**Reporter with a European-based news organization***

*They demanded to see a full list of all my Chinese colleagues – complete with ID numbers – before they would process my visa extension. I had never encountered this before. -**British reporter***



*At first, MOFA's International Press Center said they lost my paperwork, and I had to resubmit it about 10 days later. Then, the entry-exit bureau offered me a residence permit for three months instead of one year. The reason they gave me was that I had only two blank pages left in my passport, though there was plenty of room for stamps on other pages. They only agreed to give me a six-month residence permit after I told them I needed to travel home for personal reasons, and the three months would not have allowed me enough time. -Correspondent for German media*

Some journalists were called in for meetings with government representatives prior to the issuance of new press cards. Chinese authorities have also hinted to foreign journalists that non-renewal was a possibility.

· 38% of respondents said they were called in for meetings

*They said I would receive a 6-month visa, and sent me off with a clear message that they hoped my reporting would "improve." We, of course, do not bow to pressure like this. -Correspondent for a U.K. news organization*

*I was summoned to MOFA for a "friendly talk" on the same day I had an appointment with them to renew my press card. It was supposed to be a talk with one of the officials, and then two more came. They kept asking questions about my company's position and my personal position on Hong Kong. It was a few days before the 70th anniversary. They were not satisfied with my answers (so they said) but issued my card. -Javier Triana, Efe News Agency*

*The Foreign Ministry representative spoke a lot about the need for constructive rather than critical reporting. -Reporter for a European broadcaster*

*At our visa renewal meetings, MOFA will tell us that they are not happy about our reports. At these meetings, MOFA will not make explicit concrete demands, but will pick out specific reports to criticize, such as on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and so on. -Yoshimi Nishiaki, Beijing bureau chief, Sankei Shimbun*

Journalists have also been threatened with the non-renewal of visas while reporting in the field.

*A plainclothes police officer suggested we could have our visas shortened while trying to report on an underground church gathering. -Michael Greenfield, Sky News*

The process for renewing press accreditation can be lengthy and opaque.

The length of time it takes to renew a press card, the first of a two-step accreditation process, can vary significantly. The Chinese government also issues inconsistent guidance to reporters applying for renewal.

· 29% of respondents said it took more than 7 working days to renew a press card

*They told me "10 working days." In fact, I got my press card exactly one month after my demand (September 12 - October 12) and one day after the French embassy made a notification to the MOFA International Press Center. -Frédéric Lemaître, Le Monde*

*[My application took] from about Aug 1 to Sept 23. -Reporter for a large Western newspaper*

Upon receiving a press card, foreign journalists must then apply for residence permits at the entry-exit office, under the national Public Security Bureau. Although the vast majority of respondents received their new permit

within the expected processing time, this step requires foreign journalists to give up their passport, severely limiting their ability to travel in China and abroad. Correspondents receiving curtailed visas are forced to go through this process every few weeks, which extends to spouses and children on attached visas.

- **27%** of respondents said leaving their passport led to issues with international travel, banks and hotels
- **5%** of respondents said it took more than 10 working days to receive a new residence permit from the entry-exit office

*I couldn't go on assignment to Hong Kong, which my headquarters wanted. -Bill Birtles, ABC News*

*It is impossible during that time to exchange money in the bank or do any bank operations requiring your presence. -European media outlet*

*With press card durations of six or three months, the loss of the passport for 10 working days each time is a major inconvenience, impacting both work and family life. Which is the point of course. -Reporter with a European-based news organization*

Foreign journalists also encounter long delays when applying for visas to enter China for the first time. In practice, this means some must postpone start dates, leaving major news organizations with a lack of coverage from the country. In some instances, journalists are never approved for accreditation to work in China.

- **47%** of respondents said their new visa applications took four months or longer
- **33%** of respondents said their new visa applications took one to four months
- **20%** of respondents said their new visa applications took less than one month

*I could enter China only three weeks later than scheduled, which left us with a gap in China. The former correspondent had already left, because his visa had expired. The answer from MOFA why it took so long was: "Other departments" had to check on the visa application and confirm. -TV correspondent for a European broadcaster*

*MOFA in Beijing said [the visa] had been approved while the Hong Kong Liaison Office said it had not. That went on for around a month and really slowed everything down. -Helen Roxburgh, deputy news editor, AFP*

Journalists are regularly denied long-term resident journalist visas (J-1) and short-term journalist visas (J-2) by the Chinese government. In one instance, a European journalist had to wait nearly a year when applying for a new J-1 visa.

- **42%** of respondents said they knew of colleagues or other journalists denied a J-1 visa
- **14%** of respondents said they knew of colleagues or other journalists denied a J-2 visa

*Two people were denied J-1 visas. There was no clear explanation for the denial. -Editor at European-based news organization*

*Before I left in July, we submitted an application for a temporary journalist visa in June so that someone could come and cover for me while a new candidate was chosen. That visa was never awarded and in September, my colleague had to go to the embassy in DC to retrieve his passport. A second application for a temporary visa was submitted in November and there is little sign of any progress on that as well. -Bill Ide, Voice of America*

*We were basically told in as many words not to apply for a visa for this person, a colleague who did China stories outside of the country, because MOFA "didn't like him." -American TV network*

## PRESSURE ON CHINESE SOURCES

Hostility toward foreign press is now so pervasive that the most basic elements of journalism are often frustrated in China. Chinese authorities regularly pressure people to avoid speaking with foreign media, and even academics are increasingly required to obtain special permission to be interviewed. Such warnings can be explicit and intimidating in nature.

One correspondent witnessed signs inside a Chinese government building warning that speaking to Western media is considered a violation of laws on state secrets. Would-be interviewees have told correspondents that speaking to foreign media amounts to betraying the Chinese state in certain situations, such as trade frictions with the U.S.

"Even when I've contacted people who've been quoted in English-language Chinese state media – Global Times, China Daily, appearing on CGTN – they have said that they're not allowed to talk to foreign media," said Anna Fifield, Beijing bureau chief at the Washington Post.

"Chinese academics are often not willing to accept interviews, and they appear to be afraid of running afoul of the system," she said. But "I don't want to write a story about China that doesn't quote any Chinese people."

"Recently, we tried to contact a poverty alleviation bureau of a local government and they told us they were no longer allowed to speak to any media that doesn't have a Communist Party committee," said Alice Su, a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times. "So I guess that rules all of us out."

In 2019, 70 percent of correspondents reported the cancellation or withdrawal of interviews, for reasons they know or believe to be related to actions by authorities.

Correspondents' experiences suggest this problem is not exclusive to subjects Chinese authorities consider sensitive, such as politics or human rights. Instead, it permeates all reporting.

Even contact that has nothing to do with news gathering can warrant harassment. One photographer said a teenage boy who asked to take a selfie with him in Tiananmen Square was immediately stopped and questioned by uniformed police. They checked his ID card, along with that of his parents for several minutes.

Those who do speak to international correspondents risk significant reprisal, including being detained, interrogated and banned from leaving the country. Such retaliation places into question the willingness of authorities to abrogate the rights to free expression constitutionally promised to Chinese citizens.

- **76%** of respondents had interviews declined by sources who say they are not permitted to speak to foreign media, or who require prior permission to speak to foreign media
- **25%** of respondents had interviews cancelled or withdrawn because of pressure from authorities. A further **45%** believe interviews were cancelled for this reason
- **25%** of respondents were aware of sources being harassed, detained, called in for questioning, or otherwise suffering negative consequences for interacting with a foreign journalist.

This compares to 34% in 2018

*I've reported in China for 5 years and this is the hardest year yet. Scientific researchers decline to comment even to discuss their own published papers. Even Western analysts, for example, commodities researchers, decline to discuss previously non-controversial subjects, like pollution, on the record for fear of political sensitivities. Even as a fluent Chinese speaker of Chinese ethnicity, it's becoming highly difficult to get local voices and perspectives in our stories. The climate is downright hostile. -Reporter for a U.S. news organization*

*The political sensitivity of many topics previously deemed "safe" has skyrocketed, making it very difficult to interview Chinese nationals living in China. In the field of tech, interviewees – many from famous academic institutions – have rejected topics from 5G standards to semiconductor development, because of concerns over political consequences. -Yuan Yang, Financial Times*

*Sources were threatened, harassed. Some were intercepted at the border while travelling abroad. One, Professor Sun Wenguang of Shandong University, was put into a forced disappearance for more than a year after an interview with VOA in August, 2018. Authorities have not responded to VOA's requests for an explanation and information on the issue. -Yibing Feng, Voice of America*

*We were planning to film a documentary on a controversial Australian-Chinese ballet dancer. He was taking a touring ballet company to China.... The shoot was cancelled when the ballet company contacted us to tell us they had been warned by the Chinese consulate that they wouldn't get visas if they collaborated with the ABC on the documentary plan. -Bill Birtles, ABC News*

*I reached out to people in the tech sector for a story about work-life balance. They initially accepted my interview request, but then postponed indefinitely after being called in by police. They were told that now was not the right time to talk to foreign journalists, as the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre was coming up. -Charles Pellegrin, France 24*

*I arranged to interview a professor to talk about climate change at Peking University. When I double checked with her the morning before our meeting, she abruptly cancelled, citing an internal notice. She did not elaborate and only said that the interview was now "inconvenient." -Eva Xiao, AFP*

*For a story for our children's TV platform, we traveled to Henan. An innocent, feel-good story was cancelled when the owner of the private acrobatics school for the less-fortunate youth was advised by local authorities not to receive the interview since it would look bad for the Party – if the Party was successful in alleviating poverty, his initiative would "not be necessary." Since this was the night before the shoot, we were already in Henan... As an alternative, the local officials brought us to a state school. -Dutch journalist*

*We lost touch with a pastor. The last thing we know about him is that his daughter can no longer leave the country and that the assets of the pastor have been seized by the authorities. -Dutch reporter*

*I've had sources call me and tell me their relatives were detained after interacting with me. -Journalist for a Western news organization*

While in the field, journalists routinely encountered government interference, harassment or violence.

- 51% of respondents said they were obstructed at least once by police or other officials
- 25% of respondents said they were obstructed at least once by persons unknown
- 6% of respondents were subjected to manhandling or use of physical force



*China says they've got nothing to hide, and yet try and hide EVERYTHING. Fake traffic accidents, followed 24/7, security guys sleeping in the room next door in my hotel with a connecting door, random wake-ups in the middle of the night for "visa checks," physical contact with propaganda officials who tried to shove us into a police station (we had to barge our way out of their grip and onto a train), threatened arrest while doing nothing illegal. -U.S. television network*

*Threats were issued by officials from the Foreign Ministry's Information Department and the State Council Information Office over reporting on Xinjiang and on Chinese politics. -Bureau chief for a U.S. news organization*

*On Oct. 18, 2019, a number of unidentified men and women who claimed to be neighbors blocked VOA correspondents visiting late CCP leader Zhao Ziyang's residence in central Beijing, with video shot at the scene deleted by local police. -Yibing Feng, Voice of America*

*Several reporters went to Dandong to film Kim Jong Un's train and one was forcibly removed from the room facing the riverside. He got into a car and the police told the car not to take him, because they wanted him to be in their car. A policewoman tried to get into his car. So he had to push her out. -Bureau chief of European news agency*

*Filming at a Foxconn factory, the local police in conjunction with the factory security boxed our car in so we couldn't leave, and then briefly detained us while forcing us to hand over press cards and calling MOFA. A similar incident happened in Fujian a few months ago while simply filming in the streets. -ITV News*

*The person we were supposed to meet had his phone confiscated. We were followed by three cars for two days, and when entering the hall of a mother to a [Tiananmen] victim we were watched/filmed, two people were watching from a parked car, and we were stopped at the door. -Kjersti Strømmen, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation NRK*

*I was in Xinjiang. The cops caught me and my colleague at the airport, and then we were greeted by officials... They told us we couldn't stay at the only hotel that was open to foreigners, because of a broken water pipe. -U.S. media*

*I was followed from my home in Beijing to the airport, and then throughout my trip. It is jarring enough to be followed while you are in Xinjiang, but to have a car full of men waiting for you in your parking lot and a man stationed outside your home is another level. -Correspondent for a U.K. news organization*

*Armed police in Hotan prevented us from reaching a suspected detention camp. We tried to walk around – they grabbed us, tried to take our cameras and phones from our hands, etc. -Tom Cheshire, Sky News*

*In Xinjiang, we were followed – by persons and by 3-4 cars, also minder on train, fake taxis – kicked out from our hotel, detained and we were questioned. Local officials also asked about my child. -Reporter with a European-based news organization*

*A friend visiting me from another country told me he was pulled aside at customs and questioned for twenty minutes about why he was visiting me. He said he saw a picture of me flash up next to a picture of him on a screen monitored by airport staff. He stayed with me once before, but we are otherwise mystified as to how this system works. -Journalist at a Western news organization*

## THREATS AGAINST CHINESE COLLEAGUES

Most foreign media organizations working in China employ local staff. Chinese colleagues are increasingly targeted by authorities seeking to monitor and influence the work of foreign journalists.

In 2019, correspondents reported a variety of pressures on their Chinese colleagues, including threats to family members; home visits; phone calls from police; and attempts to coerce them into reporting to state security about the work of correspondents, including bribery.

In response, news organizations are now including new security measures at their bureaus in Beijing, a city considered among the safest in the world for street crime, and flying staff to other countries ahead of politically sensitive events or anniversaries.

Others provided legal and hostile environment training to Chinese staff. Some organizations withheld attribution, didn't assign Chinese colleagues to potentially sensitive stories, or kept them entirely out of certain editorial conversations.

- **44%** of respondents said Chinese colleagues had come under pressure from government officials or encountered harassment in the field while working at least once; half of those experienced this at least three times. This compares with **37%** of respondents who reported such pressure in 2018
- **41%** of respondents belong to news organizations that have put in place additional security procedures in efforts to support and/or reassure Chinese colleagues

*Chinese colleagues both in Beijing and Shanghai have been called in repeatedly to have tea, usually at a neutral coffee shop. The content of the conversations has been typical: seeking information on reporting, urging Chinese colleagues to act as informants and warnings of unspecified consequences if they do not cooperate or if they divulge that they have been called for meetings. Beyond news assistants, other Chinese staff are being subjected to similar pressure. Chinese staff are being assured of company support, told not to put themselves at risk, even if that means cooperating with the authorities, and encouraged to let the bureau or at least other colleagues know before they go to attend such a meeting. -Bureau chief for a U.S. news organization*

*State security have questioned our researchers several times, including recording them, forcing them to sign papers saying they will cooperate, calling their family members, mentioning their family members in veiled threats, as well as telling our researchers they may "find themselves in trouble" if they do not cooperate. -Correspondent for a U.K. news organization*

*We avoid using Chinese staff for sensitive stories altogether and keep bylines off stories. British journalist*

*We have arranged for lawyers to come in to brief them on what to do in case they are accosted by state security/what the law says about detention, etc. -U.S. journalist*

## DIGITAL AND HUMAN SURVEILLANCE

Journalists in China and their sources are at high risk of digital surveillance and have well-founded fears of government surveillance. Beijing has a long history of monitoring journalists using low-tech methods, like police officers, and this is being upgraded for the digital era. Chinese companies and government agencies have developed potent tools for surveillance and interception. The government owns China's telecoms

infrastructure, and has access to data sent over platforms like WeChat, the country's most popular messaging platform.

In 2019, some correspondents acquired compelling evidence that they have been the target of hacking operations or surveillance. Accounts on encrypted messaging apps were successfully hacked, and email appeared to have been compromised. For instance, authorities learned of travel plans that had only been communicated through email or encrypted messaging systems.

Chinese authorities appear also to be getting better at blocking VPNs (virtual private networks), which allow foreign journalists to access otherwise government-censored content and websites online, such as Gmail and Twitter.

• **12%** of respondents said they were aware of authorities using public surveillance systems to track them while reporting

Respondents also reported suspicions and evidence of surveillance in the following areas:

	YES, W/ EVIDENCE	YES, I SUSPECT	NO
• Fixed line telephone or mobile phone calls	3%	69%	28%
• Email communications	3%	52%	45%
• WeChat messages	5%	71%	24%
• Encrypted chat apps (Signal, WhatsApp, Telegram or similar)	2%	29%	69%
• Surveillance of home/office ("visits", bugs)	8%	48%	44%
• Cloud-based files	0%	24%	6%
• The files on my devices	1%	36%	63%

*My Telegram account has been the target of three attempted logins since June 2019, each time through interception of SMS authentication codes. That is, someone attempted to log in by requesting a text message verification code (Telegram's default login authentication), then was able to read the SMS message sent to me by my state-owned carrier, then tried to use it to log in to my account. I do not think this was a coincidence that the attacks happened at a similar time to when Telegram's servers were being attacked and Hong Kong protestors were heavily using the platform. I do not trust the state-owned carriers to keep my data secure from the government. -Yuan Yang, Financial Times*

*In October, I was preparing to go on a sensitive trip within China and had taken care to keep all my communications secure. The day before I was set to go, I called someone in the town that I was planning to visit, and was told the police had been warning people I was coming. I had to abort the whole trip, because it was clear that I would not be able to report unobstructed and without creating jeopardy for locals. I was also very alarmed to discover that the authorities had managed to intercept my communications despite my best efforts to keep them secure. -Anna Fifield, Beijing bureau chief, the Washington Post*

*At least one person I called for a story was subsequently brought in for a police interrogation. Police appeared to be asking questions based on a recording of our call. -Nathan VanderKlippe, the Globe and Mail*

*Phone calls often do not go through the first try, [and] get cut off during conversation. -Reporter for a large Western newspaper*

*In Yining, we were immediately stopped by police when we encountered a facial recognition booth outside of baggage claim. -U.S. television network*

*WeChat messages often arrive very delayed in a big group, or are censored entirely if they relate to our reporting or anything sensitive. I'm also concerned my flat might be bugged. -British journalist*

*Our office door was left ajar, items that don't belong to me have shown up in my flat, and an external hard drive with Xinjiang material was corrupted after the only time I left it in at home rather than taking it with me. -Correspondent for a U.K. news organization*

*In the case of email, phishing attacks with very specific info tailored to me, indicating that they are into some of my passwords. -Ted Plafker, the Economist*

The use of physical surveillance and interference further augments the ability of authorities to monitor and directly interfere with the work of foreign correspondents. In 2019, a small minority of respondents had electronic devices physically seized by government authorities, at international border crossings (2%) and while on reporting trips (5%).

- 24% were approached by the Ministry of State Security, or asked to meet with their representatives
  - 15% were forced to show data to authorities
  - 13% were forced to delete data
- 28% were followed or experienced some other form of human surveillance, including uninvited entry by other persons into a hotel room or apartment, 1 to 2 times
  - 6% experienced such human surveillance 3 to 5 times
  - 2% experienced such human surveillance 6 to 10 times
  - 1% experienced such human surveillance more than 10 times

*In Kashgar, police rushed Uighurs to leave from their checkpoint as we walked towards them. One policeman whispered to his colleague in Mandarin Chinese, "journalist coming," and we heard that clearly. I assumed someone checked our way from the cameras. -Reporter with a European news organization*

*Several men (police/persons unknown) came to check on us shortly after a hotel check-in during a reporting trip in Hunan province. They told us that we weren't supposed to be there, because it would be categorized as a military zone. The police officer took a picture of me with a special app on his smartphone – and he got immediate information about me via this app. He showed it to me – there was my picture, personal information etc. They asked us to leave. -Axel Dorloff, ARD German Radio*

*Some weeks after my trip to Xinjiang, our home door was wide open when I came home – even I remember clearly I locked it. Someone had touched the books of my bookshelf. Soon after that, someone had touched my computer in our locked office. I sometimes take pictures to make sure no one touches my things. -Reporter with a European news organisation*

For foreign correspondents, this significantly increases the risks of reporting in China. In a country where authorities have a history of imposing severe penalties upon those who speak out or disclose unauthorized information, pervasive surveillance compromises correspondents' ability to shield sources from retribution.

- 48% of correspondents said fear of surveillance (digital or in person) somewhat affected their ability to adequately interview and communicate with sources to carry out reporting
  - 43% said such fears regularly affected their work

*I would be wary of discussing sensitive issues with people on the street knowing that surveillance cameras are present. -Patrick Baert, Beijing bureau chief, AFP*

*I always keep in mind authorities might survey me, and therefore keep interview requests that might be delicate, vague. Some people I hesitate to approach. It also influences my choice of words in reporting sometimes, for instance, regarding Taiwan. -Journalist working for European media*

*Do we need to follow the person after the piece is aired? What does the research and the field trip mean to our Chinese news assistants? What impact could the story have on our news organization, what impact can the story have on me and my reporting in the future? -Correspondent for a European broadcaster*

*Digital surveillance is a constant consideration in communications with anyone in China, from sources to Chinese colleagues, editors and other reporters. It requires taking extra steps to secure devices and conversations (as much as possible) from intrusion. It also clearly affects what people are willing to say on the phone, over WeChat or through email. -Reporter from a large Western newspaper*

*I am very cautious about reaching out to sources on Weibo and WeChat if I want to discuss sensitive topics. Unfortunately, this means that it can be difficult to interview or even casually chat to people about politicized topics if they don't have VPN, which is a significant demographic. That in turn makes it that much harder to get a grasp of issues outside of Tier 1 cities. -Eva Xiao, AFP*

*My productivity in China is probably less than half of what I otherwise could accomplish elsewhere, given that I often have to travel in person to communicate with sources – sometimes making multiple trips, because phone lines are bugged. -Reporter for a U.S. news organization*

*I don't trust any communications sent from within China and certainly not on Chinese platforms. I presume anything can be monitored, which makes it very difficult to contact people on sensitive issues. -Reporter for a European broadcaster*

*Lots of sources decline to talk, even anonymously/offline because of feeling of total surveillance -Dutch newspaper*

## CHINA'S 'RED LINES' FOR JOURNALISTS

Chinese authorities do not require foreign correspondents to obtain prior permission for travel to any part of the country except the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

Nevertheless, correspondents are frequently told by police and local officials that reporting is restricted or prohibited when they go to areas authorities deem sensitive. The frequency of such comments from officials, often accompanied by intimidation, demonstrates a significant willingness to ignore China's own policies, which grant a high degree of freedom to foreign journalists.

- Of 31 who tried to report from Xinjiang, **94%** were told journalism was restricted or prohibited
  - Of 10 who tried to report from Tibetan-inhabited areas, **90%** experienced such problems
  - Of 11 who tried to report from North Korean border areas, **45%** experienced such problems
    - Of 6 who tried to report from Inner Mongolia, **67%** experienced such problems
    - Of 5 who tried to report from China's border with southeast Asian countries, **40%** experienced such problems
  - Of 21 who tried to report from industrial areas, such as steel-producing regions, **48%** experienced such problems



*Arriving in Kashgar, we were met at the railway station by uniformed police and lectured about obeying Chinese laws in our reporting. Though we were followed day and night, minders and police did not physically stop us from reporting. On a number of occasions minders walked ahead of us in alleys and told residents to go back inside their houses. -International news agency photographer*

*In Xinjiang, reporters were not only followed by propaganda officials while they were conducting field research, but also during meals. The journalists were also reprimanded for taking photos of propaganda murals in another region. They said that if we published our photos, we may have to bear the consequences of leaking "military secrets." -Reporter at a European news organization*

*Strangely enough, I had no problem reporting in Xinjiang in the sense that I wasn't stopped at all, but electronic surveillance was very tight and nobody was willing to speak to me on anything more than just food and tourism activities. -Garrie van Pinxteren, NRC Media*

Harassment of journalists by authorities is particularly severe in Xinjiang, the region of northwestern China where authorities have developed a broad array of tactics to monitor journalists and interfere with their reporting.

As well as direct interference with reporting activities, this now includes hotels refusing to accommodate visiting journalists, the staging of traffic accidents, and being followed by plainclothes officers and unmarked cars – illustrating the Chinese government's willingness to go to great lengths to target foreign media in hopes of blocking or influencing reporting on topics it considers unfavourable.

In one instance, reporters were barred from entering the city of Atush, in the southwest of the region, for not having contacted propaganda officials in advance. When they asked to see the rules that mandated interview requests as a prerequisite, local police said they were "internal" and wouldn't be able to show them.

Such efforts have also created difficult ethical questions for foreign journalists, some of whom said they declined to conduct interviews in Xinjiang out of fear that interviewees would be interrogated, detained or worse, as a result of their interaction with international media.

• **65%** of journalists who went to Xinjiang in 2019 were prevented from accessing locations by what they believe to be staged traffic accidents or road blockages

**Of those who went to Xinjiang:**

- **84%** were visibly followed
- **68%** had interviews visibly monitored
  - **32%** had interviews disrupted
  - **36%** were denied a hotel room
- **20%** were detained, or had a colleague detained
- **44%** were asked or forced to delete data, including photographs
  - **68%** were physically blocked from access to public areas
  - **4%** had a hotel room entered without their permission

*ID checks constantly. Cameraman temporarily detained for "having a beard" (was more like week-old stubble) at the Kazakh-China border. Police asked to delete footage of camps multiple times.*

**-U.S. television network**

*Police at hotel, knocking on hotel door, following around town, asking to see press card at airport, detaining passport at airport. Detained briefly by security near supposed military site (internment camp).*

**-British journalist**

*Next to a camp, a fake situation was staged. A so-called electric company closed the road we were walking on saying they were working and we couldn't go further. -Giulia Marchi, Italian photographer*

*I was aggressively manhandled by an armed police officer when trying to film near a suspected vocational center. -Michael Greenfield, Sky News*

*Several roadblocks appeared (with traffic cones) on the approaches to camps in the Hotan area. Once, a tractor with a water tank blocked a narrow road. In another instance, the way to a religious site was blocked by "workers" pretending to sweep but who also said that visits by nonbelievers violated their Islamic values. -Steven Lee Myers, New York Times*

*We were escorted by police to a small tourist area and forced to attend a banquet that had been hastily arranged inside a makeshift yurt. Horse and lamb were served as musicians played traditional folk music, to which government officials danced enthusiastically. Multiple requests to leave and see the town were ignored. In the end, we had to drive back to the airport immediately to avoid missing its flight. -U.S. television network*

*Told road was closed due to high winds. -U.S. news organization*

For a significant number of correspondents, Xinjiang-related pressure did not end 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.

• **33%** of journalists who went to Xinjiang were subsequently summoned to a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

*Went to meet with at least a half dozen MOFA people at the International Press Center. Was told my reporting was full of untruths. When I told them about all the harassment, including being followed, they said, "Maybe you are just a little paranoid and this didn't actually happen." I walked out of the meeting. -U.S. television network*

*Long lecture on how I didn't understand the reality in Xinjiang. -Reporter with a European based news organization*

The months of protests in Hong Kong attracted significant international media attention in 2019. Numerous Beijing-based correspondents travelled to Hong Kong multiple times throughout the year to report. But in a troubling development, authorities used the international border controls between Hong Kong and mainland China to subject some correspondents to invasive searches and questioning.

• **17%** of respondents were stopped at immigration or border security when travelling between mainland China and Hong Kong to report  
• **13%** had Chinese colleagues stopped at immigration or border security when travelling between Hong Kong and mainland China to report

*I was stopped when going through immigration at Guangzhou airport to go to Hong Kong and questioned about why I was going there. I had actually gone out of my way to go to Guangzhou instead of through the Shenzhen border, because I heard there were phone checks at the train stations. -Journalist for a Western news organization*

*I have been flagged at immigration every time I leave and re-enter mainland China since mid-October. Each time, security officers interrogate me for one to three hours when I reenter about what I work on, who I've talked to, my views on Hong Kong and Xinjiang, whether I have family in China, where I live, and to varying degrees of thoroughness check my phones and laptop for pictures. -Emily Feng, NPR*

Reports on Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping have also drawn special scrutiny, and provoked particularly strong pressure from authorities.

- **7%** of respondents said they or their media organization experienced problems – harassment or obstruction while newsgathering, or repercussions following publication/broadcast – on stories related to Xi Jinping

*At Liangjiahe, the village where Xi spent time as sent-down youth, [we were] detained for an hour by police as they conducted checks with local authorities and foreign ministry and escorted by plainclothes police through a tourist site and prevented from taking photos or talking to anyone. -Kristy Needham, Sydney Morning Herald and The Age*

*We have been requested in meetings with the Foreign Ministry to stop referring to Xi in our reports about political or diplomatic developments in China, because Xi "cannot be responsible for everything that happens in China." When we explain that we are referring to the broad political climate that has changed under his administration, the officials specifically asked that we do not refer to him by name, because it's "unnecessary." -Reporter for a U.S. news organization*

*MOFA asked if my organisation could take down articles about Xi from 2012 and 2016 as "some time had passed." I explained that's not how we do things. -Correspondent for a U.K. news organization*

Major events in China have provided authorities with another tool to pressure and punish journalists. Deliberately barring some journalists from access to news conferences has become increasingly common, while the controversial practice of screening questions to leaders continues.

Such actions deprive certain correspondents from access to newsmakers or newsworthy events, which restricts their ability to carry out their professional duties in China. Even if accreditation is granted to events or press briefings, foreign journalists are often ignored, or only permitted to ask pre-approved questions.

While covering China's annual parliamentary meetings, a reporter with a large Western newspaper "was studiously avoided," despite being the only foreign reporter in some sessions. "In more than one breakout session, every other reporter was given a chance to ask a question."

The practice of withholding access has even extended to social events, when Chinese authorities disinvited particular correspondents from gatherings organized for the foreign press corps.

- **32%** of respondents said they were denied access to a government-organized media event widely available to other foreign journalists in 2019
- **82%** of respondents said foreign correspondents should not agree to ask questions at press conferences (such as at the end of the annual parliamentary meetings) for which they have been obliged to obtain advance approval from officials.

*We should not participate in a dog-and-pony show for their propaganda purposes. -U.S. media organization*

*To me that's agreeing to play their game – and we're always going to lose at it. No free questions = no coverage. -Javier Triana, Efe News Agency*

*For us as a bureau, reporting conditions in China have been getting worse and worse. Most of this is due to MOFA, and our being rejected from reporting on official events, such as the Oct 1st celebrations. From 2017, we have been blocked from attending State Council Information Office press conferences, as we have been denied SCIO press cards, with no reason given. -Yoshimi Nishiaki, Beijing bureau chief, Sankei Shimbun*

*[Authorities have refused access for] some official visits by foreign officials, notably German chancellor Merkel, when we were told the room was not big enough to accommodate us. -Patrick Baert, AFP*

*I, and other colleagues, were denied entry to the China International Import Expo in Shanghai, despite repeated requests to attend. Other foreign news outlets were permitted entry. We were given no explanation. At many of these events, China has touted itself opening up, yet in reality has closed down further to foreign media access of those events. -Reporter for a large Western newspaper*

*We were told that if we put my name down on the application for the 70th anniversary parade that I wouldn't get in. We ignored this advice and applied as normal, but again, we were given only named invitations, which did not include me. -Reporter with a European-based news organization*

*In a press conference with our foreign minister, as well as the Chinese foreign minister [Wang Yi], Dutch media were allowed to ask two questions. This was brought back to one question right before the presser, for which I submitted a topic I was interested in. We were allowed to only ask our foreign minister a question, and the entourage of Wang Yi pressured us to not ask any questions about Hong Kong, for which we would bear the consequences. -Dutch journalist*

*We weren't approved to cover the 70th anniversary events because supposedly our application failed to include my middle name, though we were never notified about the issue until after the deadline had passed. By then, we were told it was too late to do anything. This happened around the time I received a short visa of a few months. -Correspondent for a European media outlet*

## **PRESSURE OUTSIDE OF CHINA ON FOREIGN MEDIA**

Pressure on foreign journalists extends to their home offices, as Chinese diplomats stationed abroad regularly seek to influence editors and demand coverage from correspondents that fits with the tone and content of state-controlled media.

• **30%** of respondents have seen signs of Chinese government pressure on editors at headquarters

*"Kind reminders" by press officials of the Chinese embassy in the home country to editors on what "objective" coverage should look like. -Xifan Yang, Die Zeit*

*Chinese embassy and foreign ministry publicly attacks my newspaper but this has no effect on my editors. Misguided pressure. -Journalist with a Western news organization*

*The Chinese embassy in Paris phoned our editor after the publication of our series about Xi Jinping. They send letters when we define Taiwan as a country. -Frédéric Lemaître, Le Monde*

## - CONCLUSION -

The influence and pressure brought to bear on foreign journalists in China reflects how Chinese authorities extend their reach and scope in chilling ways to ensure the “China story” has but one narrative – theirs.

The continued decline in reporting conditions in China, year on year, as mapped by this survey, should be a concern for all media organizations and governments, especially in the aftermath of the recent expulsions of the Wall Street Journal reporters.

That concern should also extend to the Chinese people, who are demonstrably not being given the freedom of the press and freedom of speech granted in their constitution.

Members of the FCCC continue to operate in China and to adhere to the principles of free and open reporting as guaranteed to them under Chinese law, despite the obstacles they encounter as laid out in this report. The responsibility for upholding that law rests squarely with the Chinese government.

“The Foreign Ministry uses the daily press briefing to directly attack media organizations over their reporting,” said one veteran correspondent with a European media organization.

“Chinese state media is used as an attack vehicle against the international media in order to discredit reporting seen as being critical of China,” he said. “The government and its proxies use Western social media platforms to launch targeted attacks on the international media with the deliberate intent of discrediting critical reporting.”

“I can’t think of a single way in which reporting conditions have improved.”

## - SURVEY METHODS -

This report is based on a survey of journalists who belong to the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China in Beijing. Conducted in December 2019, 114 of 186 correspondent members representing news organizations from 25 countries and regions responded to the survey.

Percentages reflect the proportion of responses to a specific question. Not all respondents answered every question. Bureau chiefs at 12 news organizations headquartered in North America, Europe and Asia contributed extensive interviews for this report.

For data citations, please credit the the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC), a Beijing-based professional association comprising correspondents from over 25 countries and regions.

