



***The Beijing Brief* podcast
The Brookings Institution**

“What’s lost when reporters leave China?”

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Episode Summary:

How do you tell China's story when journalism in China is so limited? What is lost when so few reporters remain? Ryan Hass and Jon Czin sit down with former China correspondent Jane Perlez to discuss her favorite beats and stories, the difficulties of reporting in China, how Beijing steers foreign coverage toward "shiny bauble" stories, and the importance of people-to-people exchange between the U.S. and China.

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CZIN: Hello. You're listening to the Beijing Brief from the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm Jon Czin, a fellow and the Michael H. Armacost Chair in the China Center.

HASS: And I'm Ryan Hass, the director of the China Center. The Beijing Brief is a biweekly podcast focused on unpacking the forces shaping the U.S.-China relationship, as well as China's political, economic, and technological ambitions.

Today, we have a special guest. Jane Perlez is joining us. Jane spent three decades as a foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*, including seven years in China as a correspondent and bureau chief. During that time, Jane and I spent much time in the lobby of the Kempinski Hotel drinking tea and sharing stories, and I've been blessed to have her as a friend ever since.

Jane won a Pulitzer Prize for her reporting with staff from *The Times* on rising violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2009. Today, she is an expert podcast host herself, with her award-winning pod, *Face-Off: The U.S. vs. China*, with Rana Mitter. She's also a fellow at the Belfer Center, and we are delighted that you are with us here today, Jane.

PERLEZ: Pleasure to be here, Ryan and Jon.

[1:05]

CZIN: Well, thanks so much. So today we really want to focus on three questions. Number one, why is it so hard to tell stories about China adequately? Number two, where are we coming up short as a result? And number three, maybe where we can do a little bit better.

So I think the starting point has to be that the state of journalism in China right now is pretty bleak, despite some of the valiant efforts of our colleagues who are still on the ground there. There's just a small number of foreign correspondents who are actually still in the country and able to do really good reporting. I mean, this is illustrated most recently by the expulsion of your colleague Vivian Wong from *The New York Times*. Right?

And when you read about China today, I feel like a lot of the conversation is either bi— it's bimodal. Right? You either have stories about how China is overtaking us in advanced technologies, the gleaming infrastructure, right, how advanced they are. Or you get kind of the mirror image of this, right, where China is collapsing. They have demographic problems, they are in decline, they're brittle, and they're one step away from from folding.

And in some ways, you know, there's elements of both of those caricatures that have some truth to them. Right? Which I think is more part of what makes it challenging to tell the story adequately.

So Jane, what we really want to do is dive into your experiences about what it was like to be a correspondent on the ground and trying to tell these stories and get a

grasp of them, and see how we can accurately understand such a multifaceted, dynamic country as China, where we have so little visibility from the outside.

[2:28]

HASS: So help us bring us into what life was like for you as a foreign correspondent in Beijing. When you were there, you were covering the rise of Xi Jinping. South China Sea was a big issue, China-North Korea relations, Trump's first trade war, a, a really rich inventory of of issues that you covered. What was your favorite beat, and how did your Chinese government counterparts respond to some of your reporting?

[2:52]

PERLEZ: Well, challenging questions. My beat was really, it was a new beat for *The Times* at the time. It was really U.S. and China relations, so I could take it wherever I wanted really. So that's why we would meet in the lobby of the Kempinski Hotel, because I wanted to know what was going on in the South China Sea, where we were beginning to see China wanting to shove the United States out as powerfully and as quickly as as they could.

So one of the stories I wrote about that actually never, I didn't write it. Never saw the light of day. At about that time, as you remember, Ryan, the Chinese were training civilian boat owners to join their Coast Guard to try and push American ships out of the way, basically. And we found out that, we have no idea how this happened, but the secret services found out that we were talking to one of the civilians involved in this training exercise, and we had to cancel the story altogether.

So that is a simple illustration of how tough it could be and is to report in China on anything that touches on the U.S. relationship or anything that touches on China qua China. It's very tough indeed.

[4:11]

CZIN: So that's a great example of a story you had to shelve. What about the stories that you were able to break during your time there? What was the toughest one to actually get to the light of day and to actually surface?

[4:20]

PERLEZ: Well, this probably doesn't sound so tough, but I'm going to talk about it because it was really a team effort, and I think it's something that you couldn't do today. And that is in 2017, United States was very concerned about North Korea and its ability to get the nuclear weapon. And so therefore, they were very concerned about China dealing with North Korea and allowing North Korea to sidestep sanctions.

So we went up to the border with Dandong. As you know, Dandong is the big border town between China and North Korea. And we prepared pretty well. We knew that North Korea was making a lot of money out of the textile industry, and that Chinese firms in Dandong were sending money down to Pyongyang to finance textile companies that could make clothes even cheaper than they were being made in

China. And by the way, sewing in Made in China labels, which of course was a breach of all kinds of protocols, but that doesn't matter.

So I went up to Dandong with Yu Fan, who was one of our eight fantastic, amazing researchers. The great untold story about reporting in China is that you usually have an amazing Chinese reporter with you, especially for someone like myself who doesn't really speak Chinese. But Yu Fan is now of course a PhD and is now into a whole other career, just left Washington to go to Paris, but that's another story.

We went up to Dandong, and we had organized to meet a central figure in this textile business. And we got to the airport in Dandong, and we were met by six cars full of young, but obviously MSS, security people, who followed us everywhere we went.

We went to various factories in Dandong, and then Yu Fan had a lunch date with a woman who was pivotal in this whole exercise. She was sort of the moneybags between Dandong and Pyongyang. So we had to figure out a way where we could get the lunch date with Miss Moneybags. So fortunately, she was going to be in a pizza joint in a shopping mall, and I sat in a coffee shop opposite the pizza joint, and Yu Fan was able to go in there, talk to her, and she told him, "Well, every month I pack my backpack with \$100,000, crisp U.S. notes, and take them on the eight-hour journey down to Pyongyang on the train."

So we were very pleased to have that story. I mean, the story was much more than that. But to actually talk to someone who actually delivered the goods was very interesting.

[7:08]

HASS: Well, this gets to a broader question about sourcing in, in China, because it's often clear what the Chinese government wants to be reported about what's happening in China or China's relations with others, but that isn't always necessarily the truth. And how did you differentiate? How did you sit with a source and understand what information would be of value to your readers and and what information should be scrutinized or discarded?

[7:34]

PERLEZ: Well, it's not too different to what a reporter does here in the United States. You judge the political alignment of the person. I was very lucky in the early days that I knew a princeling, and he was a little disaffected from the Xi Jinping crowd. And so we would go and have lunch in the open in an Italian restaurant in a Western hotel, and he would have the same spaghetti and ice cream every time. I don't remember what I had. But he was very, helpful in describing what was going on inside.

Unfortunately, he got sick, and he was sort of semi-detained by 2016 and passed away. I've always felt it was because of the pressure from the regime.

But then there are other people, of course, in think tanks, which are the obvious go-to place. Some of these think tank people would try to impress Western reporters, I think, with their sort of pseudo criticism of the regime, which I always discarded.

There were academics, some of whom were for real and others who were not so for real. But there was one academic who was actually quite a nationalist, but I found always very consistent. I don't know if you remember, but in 2018, it leaked a little bit early that Xi Jinping was going to cancel all term limits, and he was going to become dictator for life.

So as soon as I heard this, before the official announcement, I called this academic, who was quite a nationalist, and I told him what I knew. And there was long silence at the other end of the phone, and then he hung up. So I knew from that that this was serious, and that he didn't know about it, and that he was quite taken aback.

So there are things like that that you can judge. It's not that too different from here.

[9:29]

CZIN: That's remarkable. I mean, how much the silences speak in that kind of situation and environment. I wanted to talk a little bit about some of the structural challenges facing our, our journalists, namely just the paucity of them that are in Beijing now.

My my last recollection is that there were about two dozen U.S. journalists on the ground. What's your sense of of how big the full scope of Western journalists altogether is right now in China.

[9:54]

PERLEZ: Well, it might be a little more than that, but that's that's such a paucity. That's so, so, so few, and it's so much fewer than when I was there.

And basically, there are few because, if I can say, the Trump administration decided in the first term, towards the end of the first term, to kick out a lot of Chinese journalists here because they said that they were reporting to MSS, which I have no doubt some were writing notes to MSS, but my argument would be, why not have them right in front of you here in the United States so you can see what they're writing rather than kick them out?

And it was, and it was clear as daylight, as soon as they kicked out these journalists, you know, China would do the same, which they did.

So now there are about about 30 Western journalists. *The New York Times* has one, down from eight when I was there with equal number of researchers.

The Wall Street Journal has one. *The Washington Post* has none, zero. Bloomberg and Reuters have about five to seven each. The Brits get it easier. *The Economist* and the *FT* have about five each. And then there's *Le Monde*, *El País*, and a couple of European papers. It's very, very few for a country of 1.4 billion people.

[11:04]

CZIN: Yeah. Yeah. It's quite a, it's quite a task that that our colleagues have. And it's interesting, too, we were just having this conversation recently with some Chinese colleagues who were passing through town, and they were complaining about the lack of understanding of China, right, trotting out this usual trope. And we said, we pointed out to them, Well, we have, you know, a couple dozen people trying to cover your whole country. You don't make it easy for us to get visibility. We do have people on the ground who have wonderful language skills and have a real sense of the texture of the place and are scrupulous in how they try to do the reporting, but there's just, there's just not, not enough of them.

[11:33]

PERLEZ: Did they consider, I wonder, talking to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and others about the need for more foreign journalists? Would they take that upon themselves?

CZIN: They'd probably be loath to, would be my guess. Right?

HASS: They didn't, they didn't volunteer to take on that task, Jane.

PERLEZ: Oh, you should have shanghaied them into doing it.

CZIN: Yeah. Yeah. Or talked to your, uh, your friends in the black shoes and white socks who were following you around. Right?

PERLEZ: Exactly.

CZIN: in Dandong. You know, but it does raise an interesting question about why do you think it's the case that Beijing seems to be comfortable with having such low visibility as they do?

PERLEZ: Oh, so they can control... There's no question.

CZIN: Yeah.

[12:06]

PERLEZ: So they can control everything. As Ryan knows, I have this phrase, the shiny bauble beat. China loves to have reporters to write about tech, to write about their robots, AI, EVs, batteries, the whole lineup where they think they're conquering the United States. And it's not, it's not easy, but it's not that hard to get tours of plants that manufacture those things.

They like to control everything, and one way I discovered recently, they invite TV journalists from Britain and the United States for short tours of the shiny bauble beat.

Then I think they empower people like Kaifu Lee, the tech titan who recently invited a group of people to China, and according to a column by Michael Isikoff, the journalist who was on this trip, it was Michael Isikoff and one other, Jon Finer, who you might qualify as journalists. And it, when it came to meeting with the head of one of the Alibaba, Kaifu Lee said, "No, Jon Finer and Michael Isikoff, you can't go to that."

So they can control it at all levels.

[13:21]

HASS: So if the Chinese authorities are interested in promoting the shiny bauble beat and having people focus attention on their tremendous progress in electric vehicles and and green energy and other products, what is falling off the table? What is being lost or missed in terms of our coverage, our insight into what's happening inside China today?

[13:42]

PERLEZ: Well, it's very difficult even if there were more journalists, but what I think is missing is the human element, the very, very human element. What do people on the ground really think? What do they think of their own living standards? What do they think of the housing crisis? What do they think of life being dominated by AI? What do they think of Xi Jinping, God forbid? I mean, that would be impossible to find out, but it would be nice to get a hint. I think the human element is missing totally.

Now, Vivian Wang, who was a *New York Times* reporter until she was expelled recently, and we can go into the reasons of why, which really had, in the end, wasn't so much about Vivian, but about something else, which I'll explain. But Vivian tried very hard, and succeeded in some ways, to get the feelings of ordinary people into her coverage.

I think one of her classic pieces was Auntie Xu Min, which was a story of, about a woman who was 55 years old, got fed up with her husband, got fed up with keeping house, got in her car, and recorded her adventures as she drove around China. By the way, criticizing the divorce laws, criticizing the sexist atmosphere, giving a really, raw idea of what she really felt.

And Vivian could do this in a way because there it was on social media. But to do that in a one-on-one or in a group with other women, very impossible.

[15:14]

HASS: And what was the backstory to Vivian Wang's expulsion?

[15:18]

PERLEZ: Well, I should say, of course, the authorities made it extremely difficult for Vivian. Of course, she speaks Chinese, and she she is Chinese American, I believe, but she looks Chinese. So she was able to blend into the society well, and I think that threatened them. They invaded interviews with her. She was interviewing a musician, and an MSS guy sat in on the interview. They tried to stop her interviewing all kinds of people.

[15:45]

But in the end, as we understand it, what happened was DealBook, which is a a branch of the business desk at *The New York Times*, has a big conference at the

end of each year. And last November, they invited the president of Taiwan to address the conference, by video by the way, not in, not in human flesh, just by video. And this apparently angered someone in the high stratosphere, either of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or someone else, and they were after *The New York Times*, and it resulted in the expulsion of Vivian.

[16:21]

CZIN: You alluded to this in your your anecdote about Vivian just now and also in your story about your time in Dandong, this question of surveillance. How how did you deal with that as, as a journalist? Right? How were you able to actually have some of those more human, quote-unquote, "real interactions" with people in light of that?

[16:38]

PERLEZ: Well, it's worse now than it was when I was there, but it's extremely difficult. And most of the time, the surveillance teams succeed. They just cut off the interaction. So for example, I went down to Guizhou to do a story about a filmmaker making a documentary. To be honest, I forget what the documentary was about. But the documentary was about something I was really interested in in China. And I thought this was a way of reflecting the interesting thing in China. I couldn't go and do it firsthand, but I could do it through the documentary maker.

Well, we get to Guizhou, and the first afternoon was absolutely fantastic. Somehow, a primary school found out that we were there, and they invited us into the classroom, and we talked to the class, and they practiced their English, and everything was fine.

And then, of course, the next morning when we went to the film set, the local police had found out that we were there, and we were shoved out of town before we could watch the making of the film, and another story canceled.

[17:42]

HASS: What, what do you think is the limit to what can be gleaned from afar about what's happening inside China? In other words, why why do you feel it's so important for journalists to be on the ground in China to report on China?

[17:57]

PERLEZ: Well, I think there's great reporting done from outside, particularly now with open source intelligence. You can really do fantastic things, and Chris Buckley's doing amazing stuff on the nuclear weapons situation which obviously you can't report from inside China.

But I'm going to tell you a story about something that could have been written easily from outside China, but I actually went to the place where it was happening and I learned a lot. And you're going to laugh at this, but it was the first announcement by Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative.

And he went to Astana in Kazakhstan. And I went. And I was in the small university auditorium where he was speaking. And I was in the back row. And to my right were all the Chinese journalists who'd come to cover him with Qin Gang, who was still the spokesman for the foreign ministry. And down in the front was Wang Huning.

And Xi Jinping makes his speech about this great thing that they're going to unveil, and in the middle of it, all the journalists are taking pictures and they've got their laptops, and Xin Gang takes down one of the laptops to Wang Huning and shows it to Wang Huning and gives him a couple of images of Xi Jinping, and Wang Huning points and he obviously chooses this one. So you sort of saw how they operated, and to be honest with you, it wasn't too different from the State Department.

CZIN: That's what they need China's brightest academics for, right? All that brain power to pick the right picture.

[19:33]

HASS: You know, one of the things, Jane, that Jon and I have spent a lot of time thinking about and talking about amongst ourselves is whether and how the United States is misreading China, and how this paucity of on-the-ground journalism and shiny bauble beats is contributing to sort of a distortion of China and the United States.

And as I try to think about some of the narratives or groups that are really driving some of these discussions, I think that there are a group of people who genuinely believe that it's important to inflate the threat that China poses to the United States in order to mobilize and energize the American public behind rallying to confront a external challenger.

I think that there are others who want to sell a narrative that China is on its last legs, that it is weak and fragile, and that with one swift, hard push, we can sort of buckle China into the place that it deserves to be in their view.

[20:27]

And then there's this new group of people who are, you know, sort of referred to as "China-maxxers," people who are streamers who go to China and are just dazzled by Chongqing and fast trains and dark factories and everything else.

What is the common thread of all these groups is that they provide a clean, clear narrative that is intended to sort of elicit a a reaction or an emotional response. But the problem is that these narratives lack texture, they lack nuance, they lack that that sort of, you know, dirt underneath your fingernail feel for what's going on.

And I worry that it leads us down paths of miscalculation. And the start of the Trump administration, I think, will go down in history as a vivid example of this, where there was this faith inside the Trump administration that as Secretary Bessent said, China was holding a pair of twos. That they were weak and fragile, and with enough pressure and a strong enough push, they would buckle to American demands, which history has proven wrong in vivid detail.

But Jon, you know, you might want to add to this, but I just wanted to sort of see how that sits with you, Jane, how you react to to that.

[21:34]

CZIN: Yeah. I, I really appreciate the lay down, and it reminds me of a quip from a friend of mine who said, "This is objective analysis. You provide the objective, and we provide the analysis." Right?

I think what's really striking sometimes too is sometimes you get two of those streams cohabitating, right? Like, I think this has been one of the really interesting wrinkles, especially as the Trump administration has had to walk back from being more hawkish on China because it turned out China had a better hand than a pair of twos. Right?

You have cohabitating this notion that China, on the one hand, is formidable, it's ubiquitous, it's a threat everywhere. And number two, that they're also one push away from totally collapsing. Right? So if you try to land somewhere in between, you'll end up getting a lot of criticism. And if you try to say, "No, there is a formidable threat there, but there are real deficiencies, there's real dysfunction in the system, right, that space for having a real conversation about it, gets kind of squeezed out.

So Jane, what are your thoughts about some of these misperceptions of China or misapprehensions?

[22:29]

PERLEZ: Well, I think one of the problems is that there may be not enough perceptions, that there's so little information, and I don't think we realize that outside the Washington conversation, people in the rest of the country really don't know very much about China.

I find even, I shouldn't say this, but even in Cambridge at Harvard University where I'm at the Kennedy School producing this podcast, people who are not studying China outside the China thought bubble, there's very little real knowledge. In New York City, which you think of as being the most cosmopolitan place in the world, outside the Chinese American community and the academic community, there's also very little knowledge, and I'm sorry to say, not that much interest.

So I often tell the story, we had a dinner party at our place in Manhattan last year. There were literary agents, there were lawyers, there were people in the film business there. And there was a very short conversation about China in which somebody piped up and said, "Well, does China have nuclear weapons?"

So the bank of knowledge is so low, and I think we just need to do more to get more people knowledgeable, starting with more Americans going to college and university in China. Two-thousand American university students in China compared to 300,000 Chinese students here. I don't know how to explain that or what word to use, but it's very pathetic.

[24:06]

CZIN: That, that last point would always rankle me too when I was in government and the Chinese side would raise, "We need to augment people-to-people exchanges." And my thought was, and what I would say is, "We have lots of Chinese here. We don't have a lot of Americans there, and you make it challenging for them to be there and be there securely."

[24:22]

PERLEZ: Well, you know, and I don't like this phrase people-to-people exchanges. It sounds so bureaucratic.

CZIN: It is.

PERLEZ: It's, it's ridiculous. It just should be more conversation about having American students go and study in China or travel in China, or academics go and teach in China. There has to be a way to make this happen. It's not rocket science.

CZIN: Yeah. I've been very struck by that, I would say, over the last 10 years or so as more people have become interested in China, right, is that the opinion-to-knowledge ratio has become quite high. Right? You have a lot more people opining about it, which I think in some ways is healthy, right, but you need to establish that common baseline of just basic knowledge, right, to have, be able to have a real serious conversation.

[25:08]

PERLEZ: So in New York at the moment and up at Harvard, the conversation's all about trade, all about the shiny bauble beat. There's nothing about the people, about the problems the deep problems in the economy caused by the housing crisis caused by local governments having gone broke, and what that means on the ground in China.

We don't talk about the unemployment in China. We don't talk about the women who are totally cut out of the senior political stratosphere. Zero women on the standing committee. Zero women on the Politburo. It's worse than it has ever been.

And these are very interesting issues that would be great to have some discussion about, rather than just black and white, or they're bad, we're good.

[25:51]

HASS: So Jane, picking up on that, you've put a few interesting nuggets of ideas on the table for future reporting. If you were to go back to China now and resume your work at *The New York Times*, what what piece would you be most interested in diving into?

[26:07]

PERLEZ: Well, this is kind of counterintuitive because I've never covered women in a society really. And I think the situation of all kinds of women in China right now is so interesting. As I mentioned, they're not in the political sphere at any senior rank. They used to be. Many Chinese women are very, very successful at business, and

some of them lead very pioneering scientific companies, manufacturing places, but we don't hear about them.

[26:36]

So I think there would be a very interesting beat in talking about why women are excluded, why the Xi Jinping regime is so reactionary. They're making it harder to get divorced. and women are reacting by saying, We don't want to get married. We don't want to have children.

And they're also reacting in a very interesting way I have a friend who's a great tech reporter during the day, and at night she's a comedian. And she goes to places and she rips the hell out of the regime on women issues. And she's not alone. There are women comedians who are taking this issue to the stage in a very comedic way. That would be my first story.

[27:20]

CZIN: And a a related question, if you could interview one person in China, who would it be?

[27:25]

PERLEZ: Oh, absolutely Wang Huning, who I mentioned earlier. And for our listeners who don't know who this mysterious name is, he's one person on the standing committee. He has served three of China's presidents, Xi Jinping and his, two of his predecessors, as basically the thought machine. He's thought to be the intellectual of these regimes. And he came to the United States, I think, Ryan, was it 1988 or 1990? It was before or after Tiananmen.

CZIN: It's right before Tiananmen.

[28:01]

PERLEZ: And he had a very dim view of the United States. And he wrote a book called America Against America, which I have at home in English. I have to go home and consult it, because that's a while since I've, I've looked at it. But I think he has a very acerbic take on the United States, and it would be fascinating to talk to him about how he's guided the leaders, what he thinks of China's society today, whether he thinks China's going to totally prevail, and where the United States is headed. I think he's probably got a very dim view of the United States. It'd be interesting to see on what grounds.

[28:35]

HASS: Right. Jane The conversation has really exposed that the Chinese leadership is anxious about how they're presented both at home and abroad. How much of that anxiety do you think is justified? How much discontent versus national pride do you feel inside China, or have you felt in your time on the ground there?

[28:57]

PERLEZ: Well, as you know, Ryan, I've often said I think the regime is unnecessarily nervous about having reporters, foreign reporters in China because I don't think foreign reporters are there to tear the regime to pieces. On the other hand, they'd really like to know what people are thinking. And while it's probably not possible to get an idea of what they think of Xi Jinping, because most Chinese, as I understand it, now point to the ceiling when they're referring to him. But I think it's important that we get a better idea of what the thinking is on a whole host of issues.

And I have to say, you know, we're surveilled a lot when we're in China, especially now, much more than when I was there. But a lot of this fear of the surveillance is maybe more in our minds. I mean, they follow you everywhere, and they sometimes they sit in interviews. But a friend of mine said a lot of this fear of surveillance is perhaps atmosphere, and the real surveillance is just, is is less.

There's a tendency among Chinese not to talk to foreign correspondents because they're fearful, and that would be important to break that down.

[30:14]

HASS: Jane, it's been such a pleasure for us to have this opportunity to compare notes with you and to hear your wisdom from your time on the ground reporting in China. I've really been struck listening to the conversation how much we are being affected by the lack of journalists operating inside China.

And the effect it is having on creating a perception in the United States of China either as a tech colossus or as a monolith, when in fact, as I think this conversation has exposed, there's a lot of undercurrents in China. There's a lot of social transformation that is not yet settled inside China, and the societal factors are upstream of politics, and politics will drive the direction of the country.

And if we lose sight of those things, we do so at our own expense and risk. And so I can't thank you enough for helping to draw attention to that and to raise our awareness of the limitations of what we're seeing.

PERLEZ: Well, thank you both for your generosity in having me here. It's a great pleasure.

HASS: Thank you.

CZIN: Thank you, Jane.

[music]

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