Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People’s Republic
Mike Chinoy, (Columbia University Press, 2023), 479 pages (paperback), photographs, notes, index.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado

For much of the Cold War, American journalists covered the People’s Republic of China from the British colony of Hong Kong, largely relying on radio broadcasts, refugee interviews, and the US Consulate for clues to the opaque developments taking place in China’s distant capital. After President Nixon’s dramatic 1972 visit to China and subsequent establishment of bilateral relations, US reporters opened bureaus in Beijing and Shanghai. They then directly gathered information, interviewing officials and speaking to ordinary people. Reporters also exploited successive technical advances to gather information. In addition to radio, the journalists over time turned to television, the internet—including Chinese Weibo microblogs and Baidu’s search engine—and tools like Google Earth. In recent years, however, changes in PRC domestic politics and deteriorating relations between Beijing and Washington have resulted in an increasingly difficult environment for foreign media. Some US journalists, barred or deterred from working in Beijing, are now covering PRC developments from Seoul or Taipei.

Veteran CNN Asia correspondent Mike Chinoy, now affiliated with the US-China Institute (USCI) at the University of Southern California, has produced an oral history of American journalists covering the China beat. The book follows USCI’s video series Assignment: China, which Chinoy helped create. This collective history of American reporters in China ranges from World War II to 2021.

In format, the book resembles Studs Terkel’s 1974 bestseller, Working, which was an examination through a collection of oral histories of the meaning of work in the United States. Where Terkel quoted Americans who worked in various occupations, with their stories grouped around themes, Chinoy puts his collected statements from US reporters in chronological order. The resulting history has both cyclical and linear aspects. As with the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties, the overall shape of this history is cyclical: US reporters both early in the book’s history and at its end cover a restrictive PRC from abroad. At the same time, the history shows a linear progression in the increasingly sophisticated tools of the reporter’s trade, from transcripts of PRC radio broadcasts to global mapping software.

When the Chinese Communists in 1949 drove the Nationalists from the mainland and proclaimed the establishment of the PRC, US journalists also withdrew from and lost direct access to China. When Beijing’s initial hostility abated, with Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai in 1955 offering US journalists the chance to open bureaus in the capital, the State Department intimidated reporters with fines and jail. As John Roderick of the Associated Press recalled, the threatened fines of $10,000 and jail terms of five years “damped everything.” (22) US reporters thus worked for decades in Hong Kong, across the border from Guangdong Province. Time magazine’s Stanley Karnow, an early China-watcher in the then British colony, observed, “Here you are sitting in Hong Kong, covering these vast places, like sitting in Bermuda covering the United States.” (25)

Open sources proved to be essential in Hong Kong. The Washington Star’s Henry Bradsher recalled: “There were two primary tools. One was Xinhua She, the New China News Agency. Second was transcripts of Chinese radio broadcasts, which were jointly done by the BBC and the US Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). A serious job of China watching required going through that material every day, not only seeing what was being said, but what was not being said.” (27) Also monitoring radio and other Chinese open sources

a. In 2022, the worsening environment for journalists in China led the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) to publish a condemnatory review of Beijing’s restrictive measures in the previous year. See “2021: Locked Down or Kicked Out Covering China,” accessible at https://fccchina.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-FCCC-final.pdf?x39796. Hong Kong, which reverted to PRC control in 1997, is no longer a secure vantage point for China watchers.
b. For an earlier history of American reporters in China, extending from the start of the 20th century to 1949, see Peter Rand, China Hands: The Adventures and Ordeals of the American Journalists Who Joined Forces with the Great Chinese Revolution (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

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was a Hungarian Jesuit priest, Fr. Lazlo Ladany, whom Newsweek’s Robert Elegant described as “a great, great China watcher.” His weekly China News Analysis newsletter, in the words of the State Department’s Nicholas Platt, “matched in intensity and depth the analysis of staff that were ten to fifteen times the size.” (28)

Human intelligence also yielded insights. Unable to enter China, US journalists interviewed refugees who made their way to Hong Kong. Refugees, however, tended to be deceitful and manipulative. When telling the truth, they generally knew little that had taken place beyond their own communities. As Robert Keatley of the Wall Street Journal put it, the interviewing of refugees “wasn’t a main source. It was good for anecdotes and quotes.” (29)

Perhaps more useful were the information and insights gained in give-and-take with diplomats, intelligence officers, and local staff of the US Consulate. Joseph Lelyveld of the New York Times recalled fondly his twice-weekly sessions of tea reading at the Clipper Lounge of the Mandarin Hotel with consulate employee Vincent Lo, “a very brilliant analyst” who possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of China.

In reading these recollections, this reviewer found striking the similarities between journalists and intelligence officers. In their work, journalists on the China beat combined the roles of intelligence collector, reports officer, and analyst. While working largely in open sources, they gathered information from various streams of intelligence. The AP’s John Roderick, resident in Yan’an in World War II, had direct and frequent access to Mao Zedong and other Communist leaders. (11) Josh Chin of the Wall Street Journal and two colleagues worked with a commercial satellite imagery company and a Canadian law student to exploit Google Earth in charting in 2018 the establishment and growth of reeducation camps for Chinese Uighurs. (400) Bloomberg’s Michael Forsythe and David Barboza of the New York Times built their reports on the private fortunes of PRC leaders in published records of China’s State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC) and other open sources. (353, 355)

Counterintelligence was also a concern. Once US journalists started working in mainland China, they took various measures to evade government surveillance and protect their sources and information as they went about Beijing and ventured into such sensitive and remote areas as Tibet and Xinjiang. Lisa Lim of National Public Radio (NPR) recalled how, as wary Chinese authorities increased surveillance in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, US journalists began incorporating into their news gathering “a real element of tradecraft, almost in the spy way,” with such practices as flying into a province adjacent to the final destination, hiring a car to drive into the target province, then switching to a second car with local license plates. They also avoided staying at hotels. (333)

Journalists would remove incriminating USB thumbdrives from their electronic devices and replace them with ones storing innocuous information. CNN’s Rebecca MacKinnon recalled her camera operator filming a sensitive interview with the mother of a student killed in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, replacing the tape with a second one with which to film the mother pretending to reject the interview request, hiding the first tape in the apartment for later retrieval, and then walking out the door to let Chinese security personnel confiscate the fake tape. (262–63)

Having taking pains to evade surveillance, gather information, analyze it, and write reports, American reporters at times faced resistance from editors and publishers. Roy Rowan worked with Life colleagues to photograph and report the 1949 Communist takeover of Shanghai,

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a. In late 1965, contract Chinese translators in the Hong Kong Consulate alerted US officials to the importance of the fierce attack in the Shanghai Liberation Daily in November 1965 on the play Hai Rui Resigns from Office as an important political indicator early in the Cultural Revolution. According to State Department official Nicholas Platt, the denunciation was the “opening shot” of a campaign by Madam Mao’s faction against the Beijing Party Committee. (38)
b. US journalists were not alone in practicing “spycraft” in China. Japanese journalists have also resorted to similar practices. Shida Kenzo of Jiji Press, whose China assignments included serving as chief of its Beijing bureau, wrote in his memoir Pekin tokuhain [Beijing Correspondent] (Heibonsha, 1999) of his efforts to thwart Chinese surveillance by using public telephones to call sources, exiting a hired car far from his rendezvous, and walking the rest of the way. Noguchi Toshu of the newspaper Sankei Shimbun recalled in his memoir Chugoku shin no kenyoku eri-to: Gun, choho chian kikan [China’s Real Power Elite: Military and Intelligence/Security Organs], (Shinchosha, 2012) hiding his camera’s memory card containing sensitive photographs in his socks and replacing it with a substitute showing nothing incriminating before Chinese officials intercepted him.
showing the elite Western residents carrying on at the French Club and Nationalist soldiers in retreat throwing their uniforms into the Huangpu River and seeking civilian clothes to hide their identities. Life declined to publish their eyewitness account. (19) Karnow recalled covering China for the publications of Henry Luce as “a challenge” because the publishing giant, born and raised in China, was “fiercely anticommunist.”

At times, reporters contended with editors seeking only positive stories. When the pendulum swung to interest in critical coverage of human rights in China, some journalists worried that the media were failing to report the story of the nation’s remarkable economic rise.

A final striking aspect of this book’s history is the importance of language and area knowledge in covering China. Many reporters went on the China beat after studying Chinese and, in some cases, earning a degree in Asian studies. Henry Lieberman of the New York Times had studied Chinese at Columbia University before serving during World War II with the Office of War Information (OWI) in China and later returning to Asia as a journalist to cover China. Newsweek’s Robert Elegant acquired a master’s degree at Columbia in Far Eastern studies. Orville Schell earned a doctoral degree in Chinese history from Berkeley before writing on China for the New Yorker. As Chinoy noted in the book’s introduction, he and other US journalists studied the language, culture, and history as part of their “abiding passion” for the country at the center of their careers.

Their knowledge gave them access. Newsweek’s Dorinda Elliott, who had studied Chinese and earned a bachelor’s degree in East Asian studies at Harvard, recalled how Chinese intellectuals and others at the forefront of change in the 1980s were open to US journalists, “especially if you spoke Chinese. They gave us a window onto what was going on.” (161–2) Chinese officials, keen to keep that window shut, at times expressed a wary view of Americans with area knowledge. A Foreign Ministry official once castigated Robert Elegant for his “negative” if accurate reporting on China and berated his knowledge of the language as “too damned good!” (96)

Mike Chinoy’s collection of oral histories offers fascinating accounts of US reporters covering one of journalism’s key international beats over the course of close to a century. The only thing missing, in my view, is information on the Chinese employees of the US news organizations in Beijing and Shanghai. Andrew Browne of the Wall Street Journal described the typical “two-tiered” bureau as one with a core of Chinese assistants working for a few foreign reporters. According to Chinoy, “the Chinese assistants were indispensable windows into Chinese society and, at many news organizations, were acting as reporters in all but name. Critical in developing story ideas, finding interviewees, translation, and research, the assistants were heavily involved in almost every aspect of coverage.” (287)

It would have been fascinating to read their accounts of working in US news bureaus after the Foreign Ministry’s Diplomatic Service Bureau placed them there. I particularly wish that Chinoy had addressed the intelligence threat to reporters who employed PRC nationals assigned to them by the DSB. Sankei Shimbun’s Beijing Bureau correspondent Noguchi Toshu would tell the many

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a. Luce’s publications included the magazines Time, Life, and Fortune.
visiting Japanese who queried him on possible spying by local staff that one had to work while keeping that possibility in mind. To protect his sources, for example, Noguchi never used his bureau’s Chinese drivers when meeting a source whom he wished to protect. *(Chugoku shin no kenyoku eri-to, 39–40)* Still, given the sensitivity of their status as PRC citizens working for US journalists, it is understandable that Chinoy decided against interviewing them.

This is a book for anyone interested in China or journalism.

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