

'Goodbye to China, country of contradictions'

Al Jazeera's ex-Beijing correspondent says she covered country honestly and equitably, after having credentials revoked.

Melissa Chan Last Modified: 11 May 2012 11:55



Melissa Chan, China correspondent since 2007, filed nearly 400 reports during her five years in the country. *Earlier this week, I left China after five years as an Al Jazeera English correspondent following the decision by the government to revoke my press credentials. At a subsequent Foreign Ministry press briefing, spokesman Hong Lei did not provide a public explanation, only saying that "foreign journalists should abide by Chinese laws and regulations". But I have not broken any laws. And I believe I have tried to cover China as honestly and equitably as one can. As I say goodbye to China, I think back to some of the issues and people we've covered.*

I'd like to start with a good memory of China. It was late morning in the autumn of 2009, and our team was on our way to an interview out in the countryside north of Chongqing in central China. We'd driven through many villages before, but something about the bustle of this village compelled us to slow down our car and hop out for a look. Everyone seemed so happy. There was a festive atmosphere, as if it was Chinese New Year.

People were gathered outside their doors, chatting away after their breakfasts. A woman cooked noodles at a small stand, steam enveloping her face. One family sold new baby chicks on the street side, while another group hawked duck eggs. Someone drew up a wagon of hand-woven wicker baskets, and I bought one for 20 yuan (the equivalent of \$3), strapped it to my shoulders, and wandered around with the rest of the crowd.

This was quintessential China - the daily proceedings of hundreds of millions, going about their business and working to create better lives for themselves. The place was at once traditional and modern, farmers on their mobile phones and an unbroken line of trucks pushing their way along the main street, heavy with construction material for new buildings in the old village. You could somehow sense that everyone was excited for the future, that things were changing, and that this was the little town that could. That may have been whimsical thinking on my part, but it was very much how I felt at the time.

Sad memory

A sad memory of China came later on the same day. Our team met and **interviewed Yi Dade**, a fisherman who had managed to do very well for himself. That was not the case for many other farmers, many of whom have been increasingly left behind by China's economic development. So there was much for Mr. Yi to be thankful for. Unfortunately, his successful fisheries business had caught the attention of local gangs, who bribed officials, and proceeded to seize his property on the banks of the river.

The showdown took place during a birthday party for one of Mr. Yi's sons. Two boatloads of men armed with machetes, poles, and axes drew up, jumped ashore, and attacked family and friends. In 15 minutes, Mr. Yi's fortunes had changed. His second son was dead, and his fourth had severe blows to the head that meant permanent brain damage. This was lawlessness in China, a land where some officials look the other way.

Yi Dade told me his tale while his wife sat next to him, weeping quietly and whispering repeatedly to herself, "My son was just a child." Incredibly, someone had thought to take pictures as evidence in the aftermath of the attack, and I examined the photographs of the stunned victims, the bright red of fresh blood pouring from their heads, confused expressions on their faces. Their bewildered looks seemed to ask, "How could this possibly happen to us? How could our government allow something like this to happen?"

China is a country of contradictions. One minute you marvel at the speedy transformation, the new wealth, the great hope of many. Another minute, and in this case powerfully felt because it can all happen in one day, you're disgusted by the corruption, the systemic problems of a one-party authoritarian state, and the trampling of individual human rights and dignity.

Millionaires to paupers

That is what I have tried to capture in my five years crisscrossing the country. For a couple of years there, our team was on the road somewhere in China every week. We've spoken to everyone from millionaires to paupers.

Along with manmade news and happenings, there have also been major natural disasters, most notably the 2008

Sichuan earthquake which killed 70,000. But there was also the lesser-known high altitude Yushu earthquake on the Tibetan plateau. That hit in 2010, and I remember Tibetans from the time telling us how admirably hard the People's Liberation Army soldiers had worked during rescue efforts. There was real respect for the Han Chinese soldiers, many of them from poor backgrounds themselves.

The local Tibetans had been won over a fair bit, but the government missed the opportunity to build bridges when reconstruction efforts flailed, funds for survivors were siphoned off by corrupt officials, and authorities lapsed to their hardline selves. Today, Yushu is yet another place off-limits to foreign journalists, part of a huge area placed under lockdown following a string of self-immolations by Tibetans protesting China's rule. From the initial excitement of witnessing how the ethnic divide could be narrowed, the story of Yushu had turned bitter, and relations between Tibetans and Han Chinese there are at a new low.

Missed opportunities

It is precisely these sorts of conflicts, of good and bad decisions, of missed opportunities, that the country needs to take a hard look at in this critical political year. They've played out locally in the stories I have examined, but issues such as corruption and the rule of law weave from the fisherman, Yi Dade, through to the Tibetan victims of the Yushu earthquake, and all the way up to the country's political leadership.

In Beijing it plays out on the grand scale, with the Bo Xilai scandal or the recent **Melissa Chan reports** Chen Guangcheng case. But all of it is related, and it will be up to the Communist Party to make the leap. By that, I mean that the party needs to establish real rule of law and an independent legal system. The corruption problem solves itself once the law is worth more than the paper it is printed on. Many of the stories I've worked on over the years have simply spun around the fact that the laws, presumably passed by some officials who believed in them, have not been enforced.

The only way to do any of this will take audacity, because the party would have to place itself and its members under the same independent and impartial system. Leaders are not unaware of this dilemma - that's why things have been so rocky and commentators, both inside and outside the country, have talked about what kind of institutional reforms need to start taking place.

China has a lot going for it, and that is especially felt when you've spent so much time talking to the people there. They can be incredibly resilient, despite the fact that some have definitely received the short end of the stick. Like any country, people also worry and complain, and like journalists on any beat, I've looked at those worries and complaints. It's part of the process of making a place I love a better one for its people.

I hope to be back in China one day, sooner rather than later. As for the government's decision to revoke my press credentials, I'd like my final note not to sound bitter or angry, because I don't want to look back a few years from now and read this piece and see myself having been like that. I don't deny I've been both at some points in recent days, but those sorts of feelings are best left to fade away, rather than stick around for the record.

After all, one expulsion cannot take away the incredibly fun, instructive, heart-breaking and heart-warming five years of almost 400 reports I've filed. That's a lot of stories on a lot of subjects from a lot of places in the country. And I'm grateful to have had this life-changing opportunity.

Source: Al Jazeera