

## CSCC Podcast Ep. 27: “Reporting From a Rising China – Edward Wong”

### Introduction:

Welcome back to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode you’ll hear my conversation on “Reporting From a Rising China” with Edward Wong, diplomatic correspondent for the New York Times, who previously served as the Times’s Beijing bureau chief, and altogether reported from China from 2008 to 2016. Those were especially eventful years, leading up to and then following the installation of Xi Jinping as China’s paramount leader. Now, at the very end of another eventful year—marked by a dramatic Party Congress formalizing Xi Jinping’s third term as Party Secretary, the first in-person meeting between Xi and an American president in 3 ½ years, an unexpected and remarkably widespread outbreak of protest against China’s “zero-Covid” policies, and then the sudden, haphazard dismantling of those policies (to wrenching effect)—it seems to me quite an appropriate time to reflect back on the dramas of the not-too-distant past, which deeply shaped this present moment in China’s governance and relations with the outside world.

I recorded this conversation with Ed back in October 2019—just a few months before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic—when he visited Penn to deliver some talks, including at our Center, about his different reporting beats. Of course, many things have changed in these last few years, but what haven’t are the important stories which Ed covered during his time reporting from China, the main topic of our conversation. Even seasoned “China watchers” will find fresh insights here, sharpened through the lens of hindsight, about narrative-defining stories like the Sichuan earthquake, China’s hosting of the Summer Olympics, the rise and fall of Bo Xilai, the ascendance of Xi Jinping, unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, and much more. At the same time, throughout our wide-ranging conversation, I asked Ed to speak more broadly about the unique challenges and responsibilities of reporting on China, and for the “paper of record” no less. Listening back on the recording, those exchanges on the craft of journalism (and of foreign corresponding in particular) stand out as some of my favorites.

If there’s anything in the episode which may sound a bit out of place for today’s listeners, it will be our discussion of the Hong Kong protests—then still ongoing and having just taken a violent turn—and of course our discussion of the Trump administration’s China policy and embrace of “great power competition”. When we talked, Ed had just returned from a two week reporting trip to Beijing and Hong Kong, and towards the end of our conversation, I asked him to predict the future course of developments in Hong Kong. That “time capsule” we set for future listeners is interesting and poignant to reflect on now, with the (later) knowledge of what form the Chinese government’s crackdown was soon to take. As for our discussion of Trump’s China policy, what strikes me now is how very little has changed in the following years, and notwithstanding the change in presidential administration. Most if not all of the trends in US-China relations which Ed and I talked about, then, have only accelerated and deepened since, the contours of debate in both Washington and Beijing more or less unaffected by subsequent events. It is bracing to be reminded of that so clearly here.

On a somewhat brighter note, as I record this introduction in the waning hours of 2022, I am especially mindful of the possibility that—as concerning as the lack of preparation and transparency around the Chinese government’s retreat from “zero-Covid” has been—there appears to be some hope for China’s re-engagement with the outside world after three years of relative isolation. Foreign scholars like myself and reporters like Ed who have been unable to visit China since early 2020 perhaps may begin to contemplate a return to on-the-ground observation and exchange—the lifeblood of the insights you will hear in this episode. That is an exciting prospect.

Of course, for Western reporters in particular, the restrictions of recent years also have been political in nature, with many of Ed's successors in the China bureaus of the New York Times and other American media outlets having been expelled in the spiral of reciprocal visa cancellations and denials which began in February 2020. All told, despite some marginal improvements of late, the overall presence of foreign correspondents in China today is nothing like it was during the years that Ed reported from Beijing, much less the even larger numbers posted by the time we recorded this conversation in late 2019. The costs have been obvious, and could not have been imposed at a worse time, as China's importance on the world stage has come into sharp relief. But whether there *actually* can be a substantial return to the type of journalism highlighted in this episode will depend on more than just the relaxation of Covid restrictions, and so very much remains to be seen.

To advocate for such a return, and a full restoration of foreign media presence in China, I would submit the "critical empathy" which permeates Ed's thoughtful reflections in this episode—as it does his entire body of work, 23 years at the New York Times and reporting from all over the world, including four years in Iraq covering the war. Now more than ever, given the rapidly escalating stakes, China's story—or, rather, China's myriad, immensely complex *stories*—need to be told well, unflinchingly, with the granularity that only deep immersion can afford. Looking to the past, that is exactly what you are about to hear in my conversation with Edward Wong; looking to the future, it is my fervent wish for the new year.