

ARGUMENT

# Sexpat Journalists Are Ruining Asia Coverage

Newsroom predators in foreign bureaus hurt their colleagues — and their stories.

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BY JOANNA CHIU | MAY 18, 2018, 1:45 AM

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**T**oday, I'm known as a **strong advocate** in my social circles, promoting women's and minorities' voices in media. But when I first moved to China seven years ago, as a 23-year-old Canadian reporter of Chinese ancestry, it was a different story. To some men in my professional network, I was a target, not a peer.

But the path from silent target to advocate has been a rocky one, a road signposted by incidents of harassment and aggression.

Once, a fellow journalist exited our shared taxi outside my apartment. I thought we were sharing a cab to our respective homes, but he had other expectations, and suddenly his tongue was in my face. On another evening, another journalist grabbed my wrist and dragged me out of a nightclub without a word. I was clearly too drunk to consent; it was a caveman approach to get me into bed while I was intoxicated. And on yet another occasion, in a Beijing restaurant, a Western public relations executive reached under my dress and grabbed my crotch.

The incidents aren't limited by proximity. I have received *multiple* unsolicited “dick pics” from foreign correspondents — generally on the highly monitored messaging service WeChat

. Somewhere deep in the Chinese surveillance apparatus there is a startling collection of images of journalists' genitalia.

The #MeToo campaign has reminded us of how common these stories are — but the behavior of foreign men working abroad has, in my experience, been far worse than anything I ever experienced at home. Fortunately for me, I've experienced this only as part of the wider journalist community, not in my own workplaces — but others haven't been so lucky. The phenomenon is not a problem unique to the press, but it's one that's especially problematic for journalists.

A somber meeting this Tuesday of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China, which represents the interests of foreign journalists in a difficult local environment, provided another painful example of this. As the *New York Times* **reported**, former club president Jonathan Kaiman, who had resigned in January after being accused of sexual misconduct by Laura Tucker, a former friend of his, was now accused of sexually assaulting a female journalist, Felicia Sonmez. After the second accusation, the *Los Angeles Times* **quickly suspended** him from his role as Beijing bureau chief and has begun an investigation. But as the *Hong Kong Free Press* **noted**, the original accusation had prompted many male correspondents to launch misogynistic **attacks** on Tucker in online conversations.

Such actions, and entitlement, reflect a sense of privilege and a penchant for sexual aggression that threatens to distort the stories told about Asia, and that too often leaves the telling in the hands of the same men preying on their colleagues. I have seen correspondents I know to be serial offenders in private take the lead role in reporting on the sufferings of

Asian women, or boast of their bravery in covering human rights. In too many stories, Asian men are treated as the sole meaningful actors, while Asian women are reduced to sex objects or victims. And this bad behavior — and the bad coverage that follows — is a pattern that repeats across Asia, from Tokyo to Phnom Penh.

To be sure, some of the most vocal male advocates for women I've known have been people reacting against this dynamic among their peers. But a few good men aside, the entitlement and actions of many of the men I have encountered in media-related industries from Hong Kong and Beijing was unlike anything I encountered at home in Vancouver, Canada, or as a student in New York. The corrosive culture of expatriates spans multiple countries, and bad sexual behavior — dubbed “sexpat behavior” in the expat world — is hardly confined to tourists. Often the worst damage is done by men ensconced in positions of influence in journalism, diplomacy, and international business.

At the core of the problem is a lack of accountability. Behavior that could (or should) get you fired in New York often goes unremarked on in Beijing or Kuala Lumpur, where remote foreign offices have little contact with the home base and, in some cases, no mechanisms for employees to report abuse. Even when cases are reported, correspondents are sometimes simply quietly transferred to another part of Asia.

“I think a lot of expat men — especially in China and Southeast Asia — have a pretty messed up view of women,” a male photographer based in southern China says. He requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak with press. “I think some of them get away with being one way at home, but when they find themselves in these places where sex is so easily available — especially if you're a white dude and some local women see status in that — some men abuse it.”

The problems are worsened by the unequal power dynamics in the offices of multinational media that employ “local staff” to provide translation, conduct research, and navigate complex bureaucracies, but pay them a fraction of what their foreign colleagues earn. In China, these “news assistants” are mostly young women. This pattern is mirrored in other countries, where the pool of those with the English-language skills needed for the job often skew female. “Many people, especially those with real regional and local knowledge, are not hired on proper terms and have little or no recourse to the law or to union support, or even just commonsense support and mentoring,” says Didi Kirsten Tatlow, a Hong Kong-born journalist. Far-off company headquarters may not know they even exist.

“They have no job security — if there is any conflict, they can be fired the next day,” says Yajun Zhang, a former news assistant. As a result, sexual harassment and gender- or race-based discrimination can occur with impunity. Even if they raise concerns, investigation can often prove extremely difficult over distance and cultural barriers. A process like talking about a superior’s misdeeds that is difficult even in your own country can become an impossible one abroad.

In the past, Asia correspondents would regularly send news assistants on personal errands for which their own language skills were inadequate. That habit has largely faded under pressure for a younger and more diverse generation of reporters. And yet, vulnerable staff continue to take a lead role on reporting, often becoming more exposed to personal risk than the foreign correspondents — while remaining second-class employees in the eyes of the head office.

But the problems of sexual harassment and sexism are hardly limited to local hires.

One foreign correspondent who covered Asia for a top American news outlet for over 15 years tells me she faced blatant sexism from her colleagues throughout her career. At times, she says, male colleagues took credit for her work; one manager told her she couldn't get a promotion because she has children.

“Without the environment of a fairer legal system, often local bureaus do whatever they want and get away with it, because of clauses that say, ‘local hire,’ or ‘local law applies,’ or ambiguous clauses in the contracts that make any complaint difficult,” she says. Even though these measures are often intended to apply to local hires, they make matters difficult for other staff as well. “When I tried complaining to higher management, they wouldn't reply, and human resources was also slow to respond.”

Most disturbingly, a source tried to rape the correspondent while she was on assignment in China. She never told her bosses for fear that disclosure would hurt her career.

Journalists parachuting in from the home office for one-off trips have also developed a reputation for treating local residents they rely on for their stories badly — especially women. In Malaysia, one experienced journalist recounts how a senior correspondent for a prestigious American newspaper arrived in Kuala Lumpur for a reporting trip last year and asked for her help. She agreed to provide contacts and he suggested meeting for dinner, which she assumed was a gesture of thanks.

“The conversation was casual at first, but over time he started asking me about my dating life and after that my sex life. I brushed him off by making jokes and tried to change the subject several times to the reporting project he was working on. I went to the washroom, and the

moment I walked out, he came towards me, grabbed me, and tried to kiss me. I dodged by moving my head aside and repeated twice, ‘No, this isn’t happening.’ It was a shock, and I could feel he wasn’t wearing any underwear when he grabbed me. I couldn’t wrap my head around what happened, and at the same time I didn’t want to burn bridges with him, because he’s a journalist with one of the most respected publications in the world,” she says, requesting anonymity to avoid professional repercussions.

Matt Schiavenza, a journalist who has covered Asia for the past 10 years and lived in China’s Yunnan province, blamed a combination of factors, including access to cheap alcohol, a sense of being far away from prying eyes, and relative legal impunity overseas for sexual harassers.

“In terms of Western journalists, I think some people have this swinging dick mentality where they’re ‘foreign correspondents’ in a James Bond sense, and fucking a lot of women is part of the cachet,” Schiavenza says.

All of this also drives women out of the industry. Besides objectification, harassment, and assault, female professionals also have to put up with problems such as unequal pay. In January, BBC China editor Carrie Gracie **resigned** from her post after she discovered that two male international editors at the BBC earned “at least 50% more” than their female counterparts.

As social media has increasingly provided an outlet for journalists to speak about such problems, the issues are becoming apparent to casual news consumers, too. Rui Zhong, a D.C.-based researcher on U.S.-China relations at the Wilson Center, says she noticed with dismay that male journalists were arguing on social media about their own definition of consent in light of #MeToo stories coming out from Asia.

“It wasn’t surprising, because there’s been a lot of backlash to women that came forth with those stories, but it’s especially troubling when journalists have these views, because their reports are one resource that shapes the perspective of policymakers in Washington,” she says. “So, when we’re looking at coverage of gender issues in China, I think it’s reasonable to ask how reporters and analysts view consent themselves. Because that determines what kinds of stories get printed and how victims are portrayed,” she adds.

Working overseas comes with challenges, including potentially greater safety risks, and fellow journalists should make sure that they’re supporting each other instead of being part of the problem. Foreign correspondents in each country tend to see each other as colleagues even when working for competing organizations. This tight-knit quality means people can band together in the face of threats such as police interference, but it can also make it difficult for victims to speak out about harassment or assault.

Western-based organizations should look to integrate staff far closer into their global human resources networks instead of treating them as essentially disposable local hires. This would pay off not just in terms of protecting and diversifying the workforce, but also in deepening the commitment and trust of workers who often feel vulnerable and poorly treated. Even if financial practicalities make having HR staff in every country impossible, head offices need to be available and communicative even with — in fact, especially with — low-ranking staff abroad, or they risk giving predators the space to thrive.

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**TAGS:** ASIA, CANADA, CHINA, MALAYSIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, UNITED STATES

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