

Recent incidents of interference with reporting

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China's Media Freedom Committee has received a variety of reports recently about interference in correspondents' work. We note with concern the following incidents, and encourage all correspondents in China to inform us of any similar experiences they have had.

March 2015

Tianmu Village, near Tianjin

Matt Sheehan, Huffington Post

I first learned of protests in Tianmu village on March 5th from this article on Radio Free Asia. After reading it I emailed Radio Free Asia and they put me in touch with someone in the village. He invited me to come to the village to observe the protests, gather information, and stay at his home if needed.

The next morning I took the Beijing-Tianjin train, telling my contact in the village what time I was arriving. As I was getting off the train I received a message from my contact saying he was now at the police station and would contact me later. As I was walking out of the station I noticed that a plainclothes man next to me was trying to discreetly take my picture with his cell phone.

Suspicious that I was being followed, I stopped and reversed direction, quickly realizing they were trying to follow at a discreet distance. I went to directly approach them and they scattered. Over the next 15 minutes I realized there were four young men following me. I did a lot of misdirection, walking, changing direction, leaving the station, entering the station, boarding the subway, getting off, and eventually felt sure that I'd lost all four of them.

I then took a taxi to the site of the protest, outside the offices of the Village Committee in Tianmu Village of Beichen District. There were several hundred people gathered outside the office, holding up banners demanding corruption investigations of Mu Xiangyou, the Tianmu Village Party Branch Secretary. Within about 30 seconds of getting out of the cab I was surrounded by 5-7 men who were grabbing my jacket and pushing me backwards. They demanded to know what I was doing and tried to push me backwards to where a car was waiting on

the curb. One of them self-identified as a member of the Village Committee but gave no name or credentials. He was demanding to see my journalist credentials, but I couldn't take them out as men on both sides were holding my arms.

After about 30 seconds of pushing back and forth, some of the protesters intervened, stepping between me and these men and breaking me free. They told me to take pictures of the protest. I began taking out my camera when another man (who was plainclothes but I later learned was a member of the local Public Security Bureau) told me not to "do anything" or "cause a disturbance". Soon a uniformed police officer came over and told me I needed to come with him to the police station to "verify my credentials."

After futilely trying to argue that this was unnecessary, I eventually agreed to get in the waiting police car and was driven to a police station 15 minutes away that dealt with foreigners. There members of the Public Security Bureau took down all the information on my passport and journalist credentials and called the Foreign Ministry, which verified my right to work as a journalist.

I asked to go, but they told me I had to stay and speak with representatives of the local propaganda bureau and the office for dealing with foreigners. After about 30 minutes these people arrived and began trying to convince that I could not go back to the protest without first receiving approval from the Village Committee or propaganda bureau. They also said members of the Village Committee had declined to speak with me or grant authorization. When I cited Chinese laws that disproved this theory (journalists only need the approval of the person they are interviewing), they changed tactics and tried to tell me it was not in my interest and was too dangerous to go back to the protest. They kept offering to take me back to the train station but wouldn't let me leave the police station on my own.

We argued this point in circles for over an hour, with my main demand being that if they would not allow me to return due to "public safety" concerns they needed to present some kind of formal declaration along these lines. Eventually the woman from the local propaganda department asked if it would help if she got a representative of the Village Committee to sit down and talk. I said yes, and about 45 minutes later she came back with two men, one of whom she introduced as a member of the Village Committee.

The man from the Village Committee said "This is problem within the village and we'll resolve it within the village. It has nothing to do with you and you're not welcome here." I began writing this down, but when I began writing the other man

(who wasn't identified) began shouting, demanding to know why I was writing this down, who I was, what country I'm from, etc. I stopped writing and said I thought there had been a misunderstanding and that I didn't need to record anything. He grew increasingly angry, shouting that he had seen me at the protest and that I wasn't welcome here.

At this point the woman from the propaganda department stepped in between us and tried to calm him down, but he wouldn't be assuaged. He kept shouting and started pushing the woman. The other man told him that she was an official at the propaganda department but he shouted that he didn't care and kept pushing her. At this point I felt the situation was spinning out of control, so I left the room and went into the hallway where there were more police officers. They stepped in and kept the man in the room, not letting him out into the hallway.

I told the police that I was ready to go back to the train station and they started arranging a car. As they arranged the car, I overheard them saying that the man shouting in the room was making phone calls, and they were worried that he was calling other people to block the roads that we were going to take from the police station to the train station. They were worried that there were only a few roads out of the area around the police station, and that if they were blocked there was "no telling what would happen." As they discussed what backroads to take, I asked that one of the police officers I'd spoken with come with me in the car. Eventually they assigned two officers to the car and we left the station. As we drove, the police officers kept receiving phone calls about what roads to take and what roads to avoid.

Eventually we got to the train station and the two officers walked with me to the ticket booth, entrance, and all the way to the train. They promised that they wouldn't share any of my personal information with the man at the police station, and saw me off.

I got back to Beijing still unsure of what happened to my contact in the village who had been detained. That evening he eventually sent me a message saying that he'd been detained all day but was now back home. He said his phone had been tapped. Since then he's continued to post information about the protests on his social media account so I believe he's OK.

Matt's story from Tianmu is

here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/12/china-leaders-corruption_n_6852596.html

July 2015
Beijing
British news outlet

I was detained by security agents while trying to interview a house church leader at his home in Beijing.

Police have erected a small shed at the entrance to this guy's compound (apparently to keep an eye on him with CCTV cameras etc). If they didn't know we were going to meet him before, they did as soon as we arrived since he was obviously being monitored around the clock

We were held in the shed by three men -- one a uniformed cop, the other two in civilian clothes -- with a large stick on the table beside us. It was unpleasant. We were released after calling MOFA, probably around 45 minutes after we were detained.

We were effectively prevented from meeting with the pastor. We were told we didn't have permission from local danwei and had therefore broken reporting rules. The man in police uniform at one point grinned at me and said: you know as well as I do what is going on here.

This happened in the days after the launch of crackdown on lawyers and was, I suspect, related to that although I couldn't say for sure.

July 2015
Aksu City, Xinjiang
Stuart Leavenworth, McClatchy News Service

I was working on a story about ethnic divides in Xinjiang, by following groups of young men who are part of local parkour clubs. Parkour is a kind of urban acrobatics that has become popular worldwide, including in Xinjiang. We had no police interference or minders after checking into a hotel in Urumqi. We had a successful two days of reporting there.

We flew into Aksu in the morning, did reporting outside of town with no interference. After checking into Aksu International Hotel at about 7 pm, we went to our rooms. Thirty minutes later, when we attempted to leave hotel, we were stopped by a man in plainclothes who would not provide his ID. I insisted he show an ID, whereupon he summoned a woman in uniform, who showed me her ID. She

was Wang Li, of the Exit & Entry bureau, number 140780. There appeared to be at least five other plainclothes cops or minders of some kind. They asked what I was doing there, the usual. We sat in the lobby maybe 20 minutes and they said we could go. Later, when my assistant went back to the lobby, she was stopped by Wang Li and interrogated. My assistant said she said stuff like, "You are Chinese. Why are you working with foreign media here? You know they only look at things through colored glasses." That night, we had been invited to eat dinner at the home of a Uighur family. I was concerned we might get them in trouble if we were followed to their house. So my assistant and I tested how closely we were being followed, but going outside, splitting up and then keeping track of our minders. From what I could tell, they had two people on each of us, talking on cell phones the whole time and being pretty obvious about following us. I decided to call off the dinner and had my assistant let our hosts know we could not join them. We stayed in Aksu another day and we were followed the whole time, although our minders did not follow us into restaurants and shops we visited.

August 2015

Tianjin

European reporter

We were doing a story about the family of missing firefighters who work on contract with Tianjin Port authorities.

We were in contact with family members of the non-PSB fire brigade members who are missing in the Tianjin blast. We were going to pick them up when we got an SMS from an unknown number telling us time and venue for the daily press conference. Then, family members phones got scrambled and our phones as well. By the time we could reach them they told us they were warned not to go out and talk to journalists. They went out anyway.

My news assistant picked them up by car while I scouted the location (a coffee shop). Even before the family members and news assistant arrived, 2 men with badges saying 'Gongzuorenyuan' took the seats right behind us. We changed seats so they could not overhear. While we interviewed the family, in total around six men swarmed around us and listened in. They made themselves very visible. The family got nervous and wanted to go back to the hotel. Me and my news assistant got in our car to bring them back. As we prepared to leave three men knocked on the window and started to ask questions in a rude way, for example, asking if we are related to firefighters, if we are related to firefighters family. Since they did not

identify themselves (only said they were 'volunteers').

We closed the window and left. We were followed by a minivan on our way to the hotel. To confirm it was really following us, we drove into a dead end street. There the van waited for us. The van did not seek out confrontation and neither did we. It kept on following us until we dropped the family off at the hotel. We checked with the family by phone and they said they did not have any problems going back to their room but asked us to stop contacting them, because they were afraid their contact with journalists would be used against them while they needed the government to help them find their missing firefighter son.

August 2015

Tianjin

European news outlet

We had a bunch of interference in Tianjin. I was held up by police on the side of the road for about an hour along with a video journalist colleague, who is a Chinese national, when we were covering a protest by families of dead firefighters. They kept us from covering the protest.

Also want to add that plainclothes and uniformed police literally locked us in the room where press conferences were held at the hotel in Tianjin at least twice - we have photos of the padlocks - to prevent us from speaking to firefighters' families, who had charged into the hotel demanding to speak with journalists. They even locked up the fire exit, which is pretty ironic considering we were there covering government screw-ups that led to a massive fire! I asked to leave to use the bathroom and they refused.

August 2015

Tianjin

American news outlet

I was shooting interviews in Tianjin on a street corner near a police station the day after the blasts. The police thought I was shooting the front of the station. Even though the station was just a few steps away, they got into a police car, put their lights and siren on and came across the street.

When they arrived to where I was set up, they started demanding that I come with them. I told them I was just asking people about the air and their concerns about

what was in it. One policeman grabbed my arm and I told him there was no need to do that. He eventually let go of my arm. The other asked to see the footage and I showed it to them. After that, they sort of shrugged it off and left after gruffly telling me I could not shoot any video of a police station. Seeing no need to press the issue any further, I packed up my stuff and moved along.

Reproduced with the permission of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China