

Ep. 113 Telling the Stories Behind China's Biggest Political Developments

Judith Kelley [00:00:01] In the late 1980s, I lived in China and worked with a theater company to teach English in schools all over China. Every time we entered the country, we went through Hong Kong. When I was there, Hong Kong was a British colony. But in 1997, Britain gave Hong Kong back to China under the stipulation that the city would remain autonomous for 50 years. When I was traveling through Hong Kong into China, I was always struck by how different Hong Kong felt from mainland China. I couldn't imagine Hong Kong losing its independence to China. But now China is on a quest for cultural and political unity. As a result, various regions and peoples are losing their rights. What is happening in China? And how does this affect international relations? Today, I'm joined by a journalist who is here to help us answer some of these questions. I'm your host, Judith Kelly, and this is Policy 360. Emily Fang is NPR's Beijing correspondent. Emily's career as a journalist has taken her all over China as she covers critical topics like human rights, technology and the environment. Before joining NPR, she served as a foreign correspondent for the Financial Times, during which she uncovered key information surrounding Chinese oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, China. Emily's coverage of the human rights abuses in Xinjiang won several human rights press and journalism awards. Emily, welcome.

Emily Fang [00:01:34] Thank you so much for having me.

Judith Kelley [00:01:36] It's a pleasure, Emily. So you graduated from Duke University with a degree in public policy just five years ago, and then not even two years later, you found yourself dashing around China, covering some of the most pressing stories for the Financial Times. So how did you get to that point?

Emily Fang [00:01:54] I moved to China as soon as I graduated, and I still remember sitting on that commercial flight going from New York to Beijing. And weirdly, I was super calm. I had all of my belongings in two suitcases and I just knew that this was the right choice for me at the moment. So I landed there July 2015, a few months after graduating. I freelanced for about a year and a half, and then I joined the Financial Times. One of the places where I was lucky to have a home when I first landed was the New York Times, which unfortunately has been decimated in the last few months by several rounds of explosions here in China. But it was I looking back the right time to arrive. China was still relatively open, friendly towards the foreign media. It was still possible, as I was doing at the time, to work on not a journalist visa. These days, that would be so risky that I would caution anyone against doing that. But it was just during the twilight months of a more open post 2008 Beijing Olympics period. And it was just as President Xi Jinping was starting to consolidate power and to crack down on foreign media, on domestic media, on Chinese civil society. And so when people ask me, how was it reporting in China I hear it's really difficult for journalists to operate there. I say yes, but I've actually never known anything different. The year that I arrived was really when reporting whether you were a Chinese journalist or a foreign journalist started to become more difficult. Not that it was easy before. So I've only ever known changing things China. And that's a particular perspective that might be different from longtime foreign correspondents who've been based continuously for years or have come back throughout the years to observe how China's changed.

Judith Kelley [00:03:40] It's fascinating that you just sort of had that gut feeling that this is what you what you needed to do. And I'm so glad it's worked out. And it's resulted in a lot

of meaningful reporting, especially around the Uighurs. Of course, you know, Xinjiang is an autonomous region in China and we have this Turkish speaking minority there. Did you know about the Uighurs before you started reporting on them? What drove you to do that?

Emily Fang [00:04:03] I did. And I was always fascinated by ethnic policy in China, which is very much based on the Soviet model. It's actually completely based on the Soviet model of having these autonomous regions where different ethnic minorities are categorized and given some cultural autonomy. But not so much political autonomy. I knew that the Uighurs were out there. I was fascinated by different expressions of what it meant to be part of the Chinese state, but not look, speak or act as the Han ethnic majority do. I am Han ethnic majority, actually. My parents were born and raised in China before moving to the US. And so that experience of seeing people who are so different from me. But in the eyes of Beijing are Chinese citizens was very alluring. And one of the first trips that I took across China when I moved here was to Xinjiang. It was incredible. This was 2017. It was right before the security measures began to become very strict in the region. It was just on the cusp of when they were beginning some of the large scale detention, what they call reeducation camps for mostly Uighurs, but other ethnic minorities as well. And it was it was magical. So that was my introduction. But then I went back exactly one year later on a reporting trip for the Financial Times. And in that one year period, you could feel a difference both in the tenseness in the atmosphere. People were much more nervous. And there were already fewer people on the street because the detention campaigns had begun.

Judith Kelley [00:05:34] You know, China has had a long history of sort of cultural, forced cultural assimilation of different different groups into into the Chinese society. What are they trying to accomplish with the Uighurs in particular? Why are they so determined to suppress this minority and in what ways are they going about it?

Emily Fang [00:05:53] So there are 55 ethnic minorities officially recognized in China. The Uighurs are one of them. There are about 11 million of them living in Xinjiang. And they're, by far, not the largest ethnic minority in China. But they have a very distinct identity. Their Turkish speaking meaning, their language is completely unrelated to Mandarin. And they have a long history of occupying China, of being on the fringes of the Chinese empire, of trading and in some times, in some cases, conquering various Chinese kingdoms over the millennia. And so they've they've always had a tenuous relationship with various Chinese empires. You know, in the 20th century, they were they were more into the sphere of Russian influence of the Russian empire than they were of Beijing. And so that combination of sometimes being the foreign aggressor, the foreign barbarian, and also having a very well-preserved, distinct ethnic and cultural identity has always made them a difficult group for Beijing to to understand and to incorporate into their project of statehood. Add to that decades of of colonialism, essentially post 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party comes into power. They quickly invade Tibet, they invade Xinjiang. They bring those regions under Beijing's control. But for decades, the strict economic inequality exists where it's very difficult for these regions to develop. And not many resources are dedicated to these these far flung regions. And there is this burgeoning racism against these people who, draw into themselves. In the early 2000s, you have a series of violent terrorist attacks from fringe elements within the Uighur population and China uses that as a reason to begin their detention and reeducation campaign. So that's a little bit of context about why China has acted so ferociously against this particular ethnic group. That being said, there are other ethnic minorities that are much better assimilated from China's view into Chinese society, into Chinese culture, that China is also now persecuting and limiting their cultural

autonomy for. So it has begun with the Uighurs and the Tibetans because they are, again, very distinct ethnic minorities. But it doesn't end with them in terms of what China has...

Judith Kelley [00:08:22] Mongolians and others...

Emily Fang [00:08:24] Yeah, Mongolians, Hui Muslims, which is one of the larger ethnic minorities in China. These two groups, the Mongolians and the Hui Muslims, look very much like Han Chinese people. They're very well assimilated. There's higher rates of intermarriage. They speak Mandarin Chinese very well. They often want their kids to go to Mandarin Chinese schools. But still they're experiencing new restrictions on their cultural autonomy. As to what Beijing's goal is with the Uighurs, it's it's to finally assimilate them. The first approach was the Soviet approach to to give them these autonomous regions where they didn't have political power. But at least they could send their children to their native language schools. They could practice their religion. They could preserve their traditions. And now the view is more what academics call second generation ethnic policy, not giving them room to practice their cultural autonomy, but instead to to bring them over to the Han Chinese side.

Judith Kelley [00:09:19] Right. And of course, the children have to attend schools. I imagine where they have to learn to speak Han and act and assimilate into the culture. What's the situation for the schools like for the children there?

Emily Fang [00:09:37] So, Xinjiang as of the last decade, they have basically eliminated Uighur language schools and people have to send their children to Mandarin Chinese schools, which, personally speaking, is not the worst thing possible. Uighur families tend to speak Uighur at home. It's a language that they have preserved over the centuries under Qing dynastic rule and now Chinese Communist Party rule. But it's symbolic, I think, of of the vanishing spaces in which these people can can practice their ethnic identity and their linguistic independence.

Judith Kelley [00:10:13] So you mentioned before that, that you're Han, Han yourself. So how did you you look very different from from the Uighurs and you had, I assume, somehow to build trust with them. What was it like for you to go there? What was what was a feeling like there? And how did you establish any kind of relationships?

Emily Fang [00:10:32] You know, at first when I used to go for reporting trips, this was late 2017, things felt quite relaxed. I could go on these reporting trips, talk to people quietly and have a few days before I was noticed by police or I felt like I was being tailed to such an extent that free, safe reporting was not possible anymore. And so a lot of my reports then were actually based on just going to the region and talking to people. That gradually became impossible throughout 2018, 2019 as the security apparatus there at the police state, these these surveillance measures became so effective that either I would not have enough time before I was noticed to actually talk to people or everyone was too nervous, just too scared to talk to me. And at a certain point by 2018, so many people who I wanted to talk to, you know, mostly Uighurs had been detained, that you would walk around southern Xinjiang where it where there's a higher concentration of Uighurs and they would just be no one around. I mean, everyone was in a detention camp, basically. So then reporting started to shift towards how do we get information from the diaspora community, from people who have fled China and are in safe haven, whether it's Kazakhstan or Turkey or Washington, D.C., and have left recently enough that they have information that can tell us something. A trend at least about what's going on inside of China or through technological means. People started turning to satellite imagery and looking at whether

they could tell from differences in shadows and how large buildings look over time to get a sense of how extensive the detention camp system was in Xinjiang whether we could download some of the surveillance apps that were that people in Xinjiang were being asked to use to get a sense of what kind of cybersecurity scrutiny they were under. All of these remote reporting methods became very, very necessary and thus common. It was a new skill set that journalists based in mainland China had to learn. In terms of establishing trust, yeah, that was sometimes an issue when I would be introduced to Uighur families, Uighur diaspora in Turkey and Kazakhstan, and they would balk when they saw my name or when I would ask to speak in Mandarin Chinese, because sometimes that was the only language we had in common. They wouldn't speak English if they really did not want to speak in Mandarin Chinese and this is an option that I give to every Chinese speaker I meet who who, you know, who may have been forced to speak Chinese at some point in their life, then I would hire an interpreter specifically so that they wouldn't we wouldn't have to speak in Chinese if that really made them feel uncomfortable. But for the most part, I have to say that the people who live in China or have an experience living in China, despite the hostility that you see in state media towards and in politics, towards the foreign press here, towards American journalists in China, there's still a strong belief among people living in China that that the foreign press can raise an issue up to the level of international scrutiny or at least to the level of of attention where someone in Beijing, a leader in Beijing, will see their story and hopefully bring justice to this case. There's still a strong belief that the central leadership in China can come and fix things if only they knew how unjust their policies were being implemented on the ground. And so there was there has been a willingness, despite initial suspicion among among Uighurs, among other ethnic minorities to talk to me, despite me having a Chinese face.

Judith Kelley [00:14:03] Is that how you found out about the children being separated from their parents? I mean, I imagine you found out about the forced labor camps. You said you became, just increasingly desolate when you went there and you're like, where are where are all the people? But how did you find out what was going on inside and about the children and their conditions?

Emily Fang [00:14:25] I had begun to suspect that because all these people being sent to detention camps and there were no reports of children being in these camps, that there were separate facilities, whether they were schools or whether they were more securitized to house all of these children whose parents had been imprisoned or detained. And I had heard over a random lunch with some Malaysian businessmen who had charity connections in China that that one of them had been funding and had visited an orphanage not far from Beijing at a vineyard also funded by the Chinese Ministry of Education. That specifically for Xinjiang orphans whose parents had been executed for drug related crimes, which is a quite common or used to be quite common, in Xinjiang. And there's always been malicious stereotypes that Uighur people are are drug peddlers and dirty and thieves. But anyways, so I was intrigued because I, I was, one, I immediately thought maybe this facility is somehow connected to a potential state run orphanage network for these left behind children, essentially, when their parents are sent to detention. And that's when I started digging. But most of that reporting, to be honest, came from, again, the overseas Uighur community who were starting to advocate and say, I made it out, but my wife hasn't made it out or my husband hasn't made it out. And before we left, we had no idea what happened to our children. And we still don't know. We, our relatives, they they they don't have them. So they've disappeared somehow into the Chinese bureaucracy. And then I finally went to Chicago at the end of that for reporting and managed to talk to people on the ground who said, you know, my neighbor's children were taken away and they were taken to a state orphanage. And and just talking to people, so it

was a combination of information from people abroad and also information from people on the ground.

Judith Kelley [00:16:14] I can't imagine as a parent, you know, not even having any idea where your children are. Must be absolutely... You know, I don't know how they manage to cope. Do you remember any kind of particular conversation you had during your time in the region that kind of sticks with you?

Emily Fang [00:16:32] Well, one of the people that I ended up quoting a lot in that piece was a young mother whose own children she still had with her. But her husband was in a detention camp and she was telling me how her neighbors living on her street had been taken away. And one of them had three young children, all of whom were placed in state schools, state orphanages. And she remembers this because her neighbors parents, who were quite elderly, had volunteered to take their grandchildren in and the state said, no, they had to go to these state schools. But but she was extraordinarily friendly. And again, she was she was hoping that by getting the story out that that some help might come.

Judith Kelley [00:17:20] I can't imagine what you say in a situation like that. You know.

Emily Fang [00:17:25] I mean, she was she was shockingly pragmatic about all of it. She still had young children to take care of. She had a husband to visit every so often and one of the lower security detention camps. So she was just worried about surviving herself. And she had a young brother who had cerebral palsy. And so she also wanted me to help him find adequate medical care. He wasn't able to get it.

Judith Kelley [00:17:48] Mm hmm. So we'll talk about Hong Kong in a little bit. Where obviously the Chinese government has really been able to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to to crush opposition even further. How is that played out in Xinjiang? And how has the pandemic effected the region and the way the Chinese government is exerting control there?

Emily Fang [00:18:12] The short answer is I don't know, because in February and March, when the entire country went under lockdown, Xinjiang went under lockdown. But to an even greater extent because it's Xinjiang and they don't take risks there. And then they had a second outbreak earlier this summer. They had about 800 cases. And because of that cluster, they banned travel in and out of the region. I can now go. So I should probably plan a trip there sometime soon. But for several months this year, it was impossible as someone who wasn't from there to to travel in and out. But, yeah, they've they've been under very, very strict lockdown. In some ways it's been successful. They've been able to contain the outbreak. Of course, I think they've probably gone overboard in that region.

Judith Kelley [00:18:57] Right. So so let's switch a little bit, Emily, to talking about Hong Kong because you've covered that. Also during a really turbulent time in its history. And I feel a really special connection to Hong Kong because I was spending a lot of time there in the late 80s and it's been really hard for me to watch the situation there while China is tightening its control over this former British colony. So. Talk to me a little bit about the time you've spent in Hong Kong over these past years and and what you've observed.

Emily Fang [00:19:31] I first went to Hong Kong as a journalist because that was where you went to wait for a journalist visa, you know, waiting for permission to actually work and enter mainland China. So it's always been this in-between space where you can get close

to China and experience, you know, this interface between the rest of the world and a more closed off country. And you can also spend time there if, lets say, you were expelled from mainland China or things become too difficult for you in mainland China. That's no longer the case. It's basically it has been part of China since 1997 officially. And in practice, it's it is like mainland China now after the national security law. I then went to Hong Kong to cover the protests last year, starting in November. Once I got new accreditation to report for NPR in mainland China. And it was really refreshing because you don't report on those sorts of protests in mainland China anymore. If you had been here in the early 2000s in mainland China, those sorts of mass incidents, as they call them, still happened. You know, these flash mobs, demonstrations, marches on the street. That's nearly impossible to pull off here in mainland China. Then all of a sudden to go to Hong Kong, where people were marching in the millions, were battling with riot police, were singing on street corners, were were creating street barricades and street art out of nothing and in several hours. It was incredible. At the same time, it really felt like the city was teetering into chaos. And of course, that is the argument that the Chinese state uses to justify this new national security law that they've implemented. But it really felt like by the end of 2019 that Hong Kongers had given up hope. And I want to emphasize that when the last wave of protests began last year over this extradition bill that Hong Kong wanted to sign with China, they started out peacefully. These are some of the largest peaceful demonstrations where parents came out with their young children to march against this extradition bill that should have been assigned to Hong Kong's leaders and to Beijing that this is what the people wanted. People in Hong Kong do not have a direct vote. They do not choose their representative, the chief executive, as they call her. So protests are how they signal what their preferences are. Unfortunately, Beijing and Hong Kong did did not listen. And so people felt the only way to get our leaders attention now is to become violent, is to create such a ruckus that they cannot help but pay attention to us and listen to our demands. And so Beijing really pushed Hong Kong into a position where they felt like nihilistically they had to be as violent as possible because everything they knew and cherished was going to disappear anyways. That the usual channels of protesting, of peaceful demonstration did not work anymore. At the very end and this was scary to watch. The slogan became, if I burn, you burn with me. And that was scary because it meant that that Hong Kong has had lost hope that some of them felt like if we're going to go under, let's go out in a blaze of glory. And some of these late night protests got extremely violent. And that was that was very sad to see because it didn't have to be that way.

Judith Kelley [00:22:50] And of course, they must feel, you know, not only desperate and desolate, but utterly betrayed because this whole notion that they were just a piece in the geopolitical game and they would be handed back over in 1997 to mainland China after having known freedom for their whole lives of the people that were living. And then just watching almost this inevitable train wreck that there was a time limit. There was going to be 50 years of of of having some freedoms. And yet it's come to an even even earlier termination than what was promised. It's really gut wrenching, too. I can understand why they feel like they have so little, so little hope. Have you been part of the protests at all or is there a protest that stands out for you that you witnessed?

Emily Fang [00:23:46] I did cover the protests and, the, I'm trying to think of when the first protest I covered was, it might have been in October or November and October, I think, and it sticks with me because I'd been to the protest during the day and that was it was pouring but thousands of people turned out and it was very much a family affair. You could bring your young children and some people did push their children in strollers along. And then at night, I walked out after producing a couple of short pieces for news programs. At

night, I walked out and it was a completely different scene. I mean, it felt like I was in a post apocalyptic parallel universe. Everyone was wearing their gas mask. They were walking around in black. Some people had body armor. People had torn off railings. And so they were dragging metal fences behind them to build barricades or using pipes to bang on the sidewalk or or bricks to make this like thudding bass sound. And so this there was this very savage rhythm to the entire night as well. And they'd created a giant bonfire and one of the main commercial districts in Hong Kong and sprayed graffiti everywhere. And there were Molotov cocktails going off and it was, you know, literal day and night contrast. But it to me showed how far along people had lost hope that this was the only way they felt like they could protest anymore and get get attention from both their own government, but also from the international media.

Judith Kelley [00:25:22] Right. So, last last month, you reported on the National Security Law and how the government has really used it to justify censorship. Can you just explain a little bit for our listeners what the national security law is and what China's trying to accomplish with it?

Emily Fang [00:25:40] It brings Hong Kong criminal law into line with what criminal law in mainland China covers in that it vastly expands which political crimes can now be sentenced to life in prison and be met with extradition to China, to mainland China, to be tried in a Chinese court. The political crimes that are covered under the national security law include secession, collusion with foreign forces, terrorism very, very broadly defined crimes that are not spelled out in detail in the law itself and so run the risk of being interpreted so generally as to encompass even, say, foreign media reporting on the ground in China. I mean, does that count as collusion with foreign forces? If you're talking to a source and they give you information that's not publicly known, which is what much, much of journalism is. And so that's had a huge chilling effect. The other thing that it sets out is this legal mechanism by which the law is global in scope. So the way that it's written can be interpreted to mean anyone who harms mainland China in some way, no matter whether they are a foreign citizen, not a citizen of Hong Kong or China, and commit that alleged crime outside of Hong Kong or outside of mainland China, this national security law is still applicable to those people and to those actions.

Judith Kelley [00:27:05] So effectively, there is now no longer any difference between Hong Kong and China when it comes to the law and and.

Emily Fang [00:27:12] Right. And you could write something in Washington, D.C. about Hong Kong. And if it somehow under the Chinese state violates national security law, you might step foot in Hong Kong or China, mainland China and suddenly face punishment and a trial under the basis of this national security law.

Judith Kelley [00:27:30] You know, it's interesting. I've I've seen some photos where they had like a photo of a shop and how it had so many protest posters and information and things like that. And then they had taken the exact same shot now and the shop that the shop had taken down everything. It looked completely different. And it really reminds me of, I was in China the week before the Tiananmen massacre. I was in Chengdu and there had been so much protest there. The whole city was full of protest posters that had been that had been put up everywhere on the main square, was full of garbage and stuff because people had been there. And everywhere you went in the city bore signs of the protest and then martial law was declared. And the next morning I went out, Emily, and it was it was the most horrifying experience I've ever had. It was like the whole city had been washed clean. Every sign of the protest were gone and people were going about their lives

as if nothing had happened. And meanwhile, of course, in Beijing, protests were continuing, but they didn't really have a way of aligning and communicating fast enough that they could coordinate between (unintelligible). So in Chengdu, everything was quiet and perfect. And it seems to me that we're seeing now in Hong Kong, it feels a little bit like the parallel with the protests in Beijing that they're just losing. They just they just want to stand up for their rights. And as you said, they have no they have no other hope. But that begs the inevitable question of what is what is the what is the ending? What is the parallel ending? We know how that went with (unintelligible). How do you think it's going to go in Hong Kong?

Emily Fang [00:29:21] Well, it eventually will become very much like a mainland city. People who have the means and the desire to move out or feel like they're under danger because of the national security law and overall Beijing's more strict governance of the region will move out. It is. You know, this was what China had hoped would happen as soon as handover was signed, sealed and delivered. And people in Hong Kong knew that. But some people did hold out hope that there was an alternative, that China itself would somehow change in those 20, 50 odd years. And to be honest, there is also, at the very least, a significant minority of people in Hong Kong who wanted Hong Kong to become more like mainland China and thought, let's just get this over with. It's too dangerous and costly to resist. If we put up a fight, then Beijing will only give us worse circumstances under which to exist. And in some ways, those fears have been borne out by how Beijing has met the protests of the last year in Hong Kong and other people would say this is my home, we we had to have at least tried.

Judith Kelley [00:30:33] Right. What is your feeling? Emily, about how the rest of the world is responding, how the United States is responding to China's violation of these agreements? And for that matter, to go to the Uighur suppression and others. Do you think that the response, one is meaningful, two has any possibility of having any effect?

Emily Fang [00:30:58] There's a limited amount of policy that that other countries, including the U.S., can put into effect with regards to Hong Kong, with regards to Xinjiang. When I say limited, I mean that nothing the U.S. or other countries do can change China's mind, can change what it wants to achieve in these regions. These regions are part of China, and China feels confident enough that it doesn't care so much what its global reputation is in these regions. And particularly President Xi Jinping seems to feel like that these are projects of his that he wants to bring under heel while he is still president and chairman of the Communist Party. But what the U.S. can do is to make it easier for residents of this region to to leave, to set up a new life somewhere else, easier for them to get visas, green cards to to settle down in the U.S.. I don't think that it was productive for the U.S. to pass the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. This is a piece of legislation that removed Hong Kong's special trading status with the U.S. special immigrations treaties. If the U.S. deemed that Hong Kong was no longer meaningfully independent of China, and so the U.S. is now beginning this process of removing Hong Kong special status, which in practice has only made the lives of Hong Kongers more difficult. It makes it much harder, for example, for them to to get visas to come to the U.S. and was a bluff that Beijing called because they they just simply didn't care about maintaining Hong Kong special trading status with the U.S..

Judith Kelley [00:32:36] It's sort of a classic sanction story. You know, it tends to, it tends to hurt the wrong people. It seems that the corona virus has really given China the full license to to carry out whatever they want to do at this point in time. And you were talking a little bit about its global reputation. I think you did a piece of reporting recently where you

were reflecting on the Pew numbers about approval ratings. Americans recently, China and then Chinese people's own view of their own government at this time. Can you reflect a little bit on that?

Emily Fang [00:33:13] I think it's a bit of a dangerous mismatch. You have rising anti China sentiment, particularly in the U.S., but in many countries around the world. But in China, surprisingly, the Corona virus, the aggression the U.S. has shown towards the Chinese state over the last year and a half, that has actually boosted China's own satisfaction with the Chinese Communist Party with with national level governance. China is more confident than ever and feels like it has the support of its citizens to be more aggressive, to be more forthright, both in consolidating state power domestically, but also projecting that in other countries.

Judith Kelley [00:33:51] Right. You know, it's such a contrast for them. It's easy for them to say, look, you know, America and Europe really messed up on the coronavirus and we we clamped down on it. We got it under control. And then it gives them cover to, you know, we don't have the bandwidth as much anymore to really pay attention.

Emily Fang [00:34:09] Right.

Judith Kelley [00:34:10] Would you be would you be worried now if you were a Taiwanese citizen about any of this spilling over?

Emily Fang [00:34:17] Very much so. And that's why you saw in January this year voters reelecting the current Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen. She had been dipping in the polls, her opponent, who was this more populist, I wouldn't even call him pro Beijing because he really didn't have a cohesive political platform. But someone who was perceived to be more friendly towards Beijing was gaining ground until the Hong Kong protests happened. And that's when the Taiwanese started to get very nervous that what was happening to Hong Kong could happen to Taiwan. Now, there are meaningful differences. Taiwan is not officially part of mainland China as as Hong Kong is. They have more geographic distance from mainland China. They have promises from the United States that the U.S. will step in militarily if China ever militarily invades Taiwan. But China has had the same political designs for Taiwan as it has for Hong Kong. For a while, some Taiwanese thought one country, two systems. The political system that China uses to govern Hong Kong might work in Taiwan. We could come under the same political banner, the same flag as Beijing, but they would give us our own political autonomy as they promised Hong Kong. That promise obviously has been proven hollow and those Taiwanese have become more defensive about Taiwan sovereignty. Of course, Taiwan now is in this difficult position about how to help Hong Kongers. And to be honest, it has not done much to help Hong Kong. The president has made statements supportive of pro-democracy activists and says that she stands with Hong Kong, but they have not extended asylum to Hong Kongers. Taiwan, in fact, has no asylum law. And so it's been very difficult for Hong Kongers trying to escape the region to to settle down and even make it to Taiwan.

Judith Kelley [00:36:08] I mean, I imagine they're trying to walk a very fine line of not, you know, attracting attention to themselves more than necessary from China and the actions they take and yet trying to be also sending a signal about where they stand. It's it's it's it's probably quite complicated politically, I imagine. Emily, you know, when I was living in China in in the late 80s, I was a Westerner, I was a foreigner and they knew I wasn't necessarily there legally, etc., but I was pretty much untouchable. So I was a Westerner.

Doing anything to me would attract attention in a way. So it was unfathomable. I felt very safe. Well just, you know, two Australian journalists were detained by Chinese officials. Several other foreign reporters have had their access revoked. How do you feel about your own situation there now, your own safety? You said when you first went five years ago, you felt this was just so right for you. How do you feel now?

Emily Fang [00:37:05] A small but meaningful correction, which is that the two Australian journalists were not detained. They were told that they had a travel ban put on them. They've been sheltered at the Australian embassy. No attempt was made by Chinese security to say, confiscate their passports or take them into detention. And then at the end of this whole standoff, they were allowed to board a commercial flight through Shanghai back to Australia. What that tells me is that this was political theater. And now we know that what happened to those Australian journalists started because Australia raided four, the homes of four Chinese journalists and academics based in Australia. And this was retribution. It was meant to send a signal to Canberra that this is what we can do to your journalists if we want to. But indeed, if they wanted to detain this Australian journalists, they could have. They have the legal means to do so. And hence there would have been nothing those journalists could have done. We are we are not there yet where we've seen the detention of a foreign journalist. Unfortunately, I fear that we're very much on that track and it's a question of who, when, rather than if. China has detained a number of foreign citizens over the last two years. The most recent was a Chinese born Australian journalist working for a Chinese state news organization. I've been told that, you know, they chose this woman because she had a Chinese face and she was naturalized Australian citizen. And so she was a safer target to pick on. A foreign journalist would be more difficult because there are higher profile.

Judith Kelley [00:38:42] Right.

Emily Fang [00:38:44] But, yeah, that is where we are headed. And so I can't go into too many details about some of the precautions that I'm taking beyond the basic, you know, having the basic cybersecurity protections and encryptions on all my devices and the usual journalistic ethics of making sure that I don't put people I talk to and people I work with in danger. I can assure you that that we have NPR does, I do, other foreign journalists. It's a small community over here who are sharing best practices and protocols of what to do if we think we're in danger of detention and constantly being alert about what's happening in our home countries that China might retaliate against by by punishing us here in Beijing.

Judith Kelley [00:39:29] Well, Emily, the reporting that you're doing is absolutely crucial. The stories about the human rights violations against the Uighurs, your reporting about the protest. It's so important for the rest of the world to know. And I hope you stay very safe. We're very proud of you as a Stanford alum for the wonderful work that you're doing. And I'm very grateful that you had the time to join us today and really congratulate you on the work that you're doing. Thank you very much Emily.

Emily Fang [00:39:58] Thank you so much. It's an honor to be a journalist here. I'm proud to be a Stanford alum. And thank you for having me on.

Judith Kelley [00:40:04] Emily Fang is NPR's Beijing correspondent. She is also a Duke University alumni with a B.A. in public policy. Until next time. I'm Judith Kelly.