In his *Critical Issues* seminar presentation, Joseph Kahn described recent trends in the relationship between China and western media through his own experiences as a correspondent for *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* over the past twenty years. While in the 2000s there were serious improvements in both the breadth of journalistic activity and the relationship between western journalists and China, recent events have soured the relationship, especially for *The New York Times*. While this has posed many challenges for Kahn and his fellow journalists, in the long term there is reason to hope that China will limit its censorship of western journalism.

Kahn began his career as a China journalist for *The Dallas Morning News*, which sent him to China in the spring of 1989 during the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown and later in the early 1990s to Hong Kong for his first full-time posting. This was a “dark period” for western journalism in China, with repression of human rights the only news story and a tense relationship between reporters and the Foreign Ministry. When Kahn moved to Shanghai in 1993, this dynamic began to improve. The Jiang Zemin era in particular bore witness to China’s rapid engagement with the outside world.

The late 1990s was also the beginning of digital publication for western news outlets. China at first blocked foreign news websites, including *The New York Times*, for whom Kahn began working in 1998. In 2001, however, *The Times* was invited to an audience with Jiang at Zhongnanhai, during which the subject of their website’s blockage was discussed and ultimately resolved. The website url was not blocked again until 2012, although individual articles continued to face censorship. The 2000s on the whole were a period of China’s increasing openness to the west and foreign journalism. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, restrictions on foreign journalists’ internal travel were dropped. With a broader environment to work in, the breadth of journalistic activity also increased. Instead of solely focusing on human rights issues, foreign journalists addressed economic growth, social trends, consumer habits, Chinese culture, and netizen activism, making China into the biggest non-war story in print.

After 2008, Kahn left China and returned to the U.S. as an editor for *The Times*, overseeing the emergence of the press’ Chinese-language website. Kahn had felt that the newspaper’s future was limited unless it started publishing in China with a Chinese-language paper. *The Times* was not the first western media outlet to consider such a venture, with *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*’ experiments preceding those of The NYT. By 2011 Kahn and his colleagues received permission to pursue a Chinese-language website from *The Times* and by the summer of 2012 opened the website. While they initially received pushback from the Foreign Ministry, after continuing to press for their case The NYT team received signals that suggested the Foreign Ministry could potentially accept the new site. This acceptance was possibly due to official speculation that western journalism, rather than unfounded *Weibo* posts, could fill a vacuum of credibility left by official state media for Chinese readers.

The Chinese website was initially a success, with by October 2012 three million and growing users and twelve million page views per day. At the same time, however, *Times* correspondent David
Barbosa was undertaking an investigative reporting project center on Wen Jiabao and his family’s scrupulous financial success. When the story went to press in October of 2012, Kahn expected that it would be a bombshell – a Chinese ambassador sent to The Times expressed that the story was a “red line” for the government and that its publication would upset the plans for the 18th Party Congress. Nevertheless, he did not expect the degree of repercussions for the newspaper and its correspondents. The English and Chinese-language websites were blocked, Times correspondents encountered difficulties accessing routine press events, and snubs and harassment for individuals associated with the paper in China became routine.

By the fall of 2013, however, the ice began to thaw in the relationship between The Times and the Foreign Ministry. The new head of the Information Office requested a dialog with the newspaper, and suggested the possibility of unblocking the website. This period of optimism ended, however, with the publication of two articles that again aggravated the Chinese government: a story of J.P. Morgan’s practice of hiring princings, one of whom happened to be Wen Jiabao’s daughter, and another article about Bloomberg Business News’ decision to not publish an expose of Xi Jinping’s family and cease to pursue reporting that would damage their relationship with the Chinese government. In the wake of these renewed tensions, the Foreign Ministry declined to approve routine visa renewals for Times correspondents in Beijing (an action which was only stayed by the intervention of Vice President Biden). The situation since this period has remained largely unchanged and The Times is likely to have problems going forward, as while visa renewals are being processed, they have not had any success with new visa applications.

There have been no signs that the government will relax its censorship of The Times’ website in the near future, although the website’s viewership has increased back to one-half of the numbers from its uncensored period. These viewers are presumably using VPNs and proxy servers to access the site. In the long term, advances in Internet technology are likely to reduce the Chinese government’s capacity to sustain its censorship apparatus. The New York Times will furthermore not change its values nor steer clear of “red lines” as defined by the Chinese government. The Chinese government, on the other hand, may have prospects for change, as suggested by Xi’s recent crackdown on high-level corruption.