

SYMONDSBURY to SHANGHAI

Reporting from one of the largest and potentially most powerful countries in the world brings its own challenges, but **Ed Lawrence** relishes the opportunity. He spoke to **Fergus Byrne** about his time in China.

Despite a video of his detention while covering an anti-lockdown protest in Shanghai going viral, former Sir John Colfox School pupil Ed Lawrence tells me he's got the 'China bug'. A senior journalist with the BBC, now based in Shanghai and reporting on stories from a country with a population of over 1.4 billion, Ed is in no doubt about what a powerhouse China is. 'When you're in the middle of these big stories' he says, 'you realize how important China is in the world, and how insignificant Britain is sometimes. You have that new perspective.'

Although he is involved in the 'big' stories on a day-to-day basis, he is also finding time to do background reports looking into life in China and how young people see their future. He has reported on the use of autonomous cars in Shanghai, as well as 'the latest trends that young people are into' including 'a big surfing boom in Hainan Island during COVID when the borders were closed and people couldn't travel.' He sees these stories as a way of learning a lot more about China, its people and their culture, and believes that the young people of China will play a huge part in the world's future.

He plays down the drama of his detention and says he feels very much at home in Shanghai, despite the protests, and despite 'getting nicked'. His detention came about when he went to report on an anti-lockdown protest that had started the previous evening. He recalls how there had been a 'really brutal lockdown in Shanghai in 2022' when he was locked down for over 70 days. 'Food supplies dwindled' he explained, and the government was giving out supplies, but it wasn't enough. Delivery networks 'were rammed' and authorities had tried to crackdown on private deliveries. He describes the situation as 'an absolute mess' that was 'handled incredibly badly'. To be fair, that is a comment that might have applied to many countries. However, in China, residents had to endure zero-Covid measures long after lockdowns had been lifted, and after many months of extended measures some decided to protest.



Ed Lawrence reporting on the Hong Kong protests

When Ed went to report on the protest he found himself targeted for detention as a foreigner. Talking about the attitude to protests he says, 'The narrative that state media had been pushing was that these [protests] are not being organized by Chinese people. These are foreign spies'. He was hauled away and detained but released when authorities learned he was there legitimately in his capacity as a BBC journalist. Throughout the experience he witnessed confusion, aggression and fear, but also quirky moments such as when one of the officers turned out to have spent time in the UK and wanted to discuss life in Manchester.

Another narrative that was promoted during the outbreak was that Covid had been brought by foreigners from overseas. Ed remembers how 'a lot of people were really hostile' and 'wouldn't let me into restaurants, they wouldn't let me stay in hotels.' But his comments are not judging or blaming the Chinese people, and he is quick to point out that these attitudes are because of the information they are receiving. 'They're not getting the full picture.'

Although his detention was alarming, he found it more frightening in the aftermath. The publicity is not what he wanted. 'And it was also incredibly frustrating because I'd rather they'd be talking about the actual story and the younger people that were protesting, and the significance of this' he says. 'And instead, it's me leading the news story on CNN and I find it incredibly problematic as a journalist. You don't really want to be the story.' The situation was further frustrated because he wasn't the only journalist arrested. 'I'm sure they probably picked up a load of innocent foreigners who they realized had nothing to do with anything. It's just a thing in the moment that blew up and let's all move on. I don't have any resentment towards China.'

Ed's journey to his position with the BBC in China is a unique story in itself. It began when he decided to learn more about his father who had abandoned him and his mother when he was only three months old. When Ed was 16 and studying for his GCSEs in Bridport, he saw stories on the news about his father 'claiming to be an archaeologist who had found some ancient lead books that were going to change the history of Christianity.' Ed set to work to find out more and says he 'started to uncover things about him which were not particularly nice. Where he'd taken money from people and claimed various titles and various schemes.' Publishing the information in a blog, Ed soon caught the attention of the police who asked him to stop publishing it. He didn't, and the story was picked up by a BBC producer who eventually broadcast a piece in the programme *Inside Out*, questioning the validity of Ed's father's claims. In the piece that aired, Ed describes his father as 'a fantasist' who tells 'very exaggerated but believable stories.'

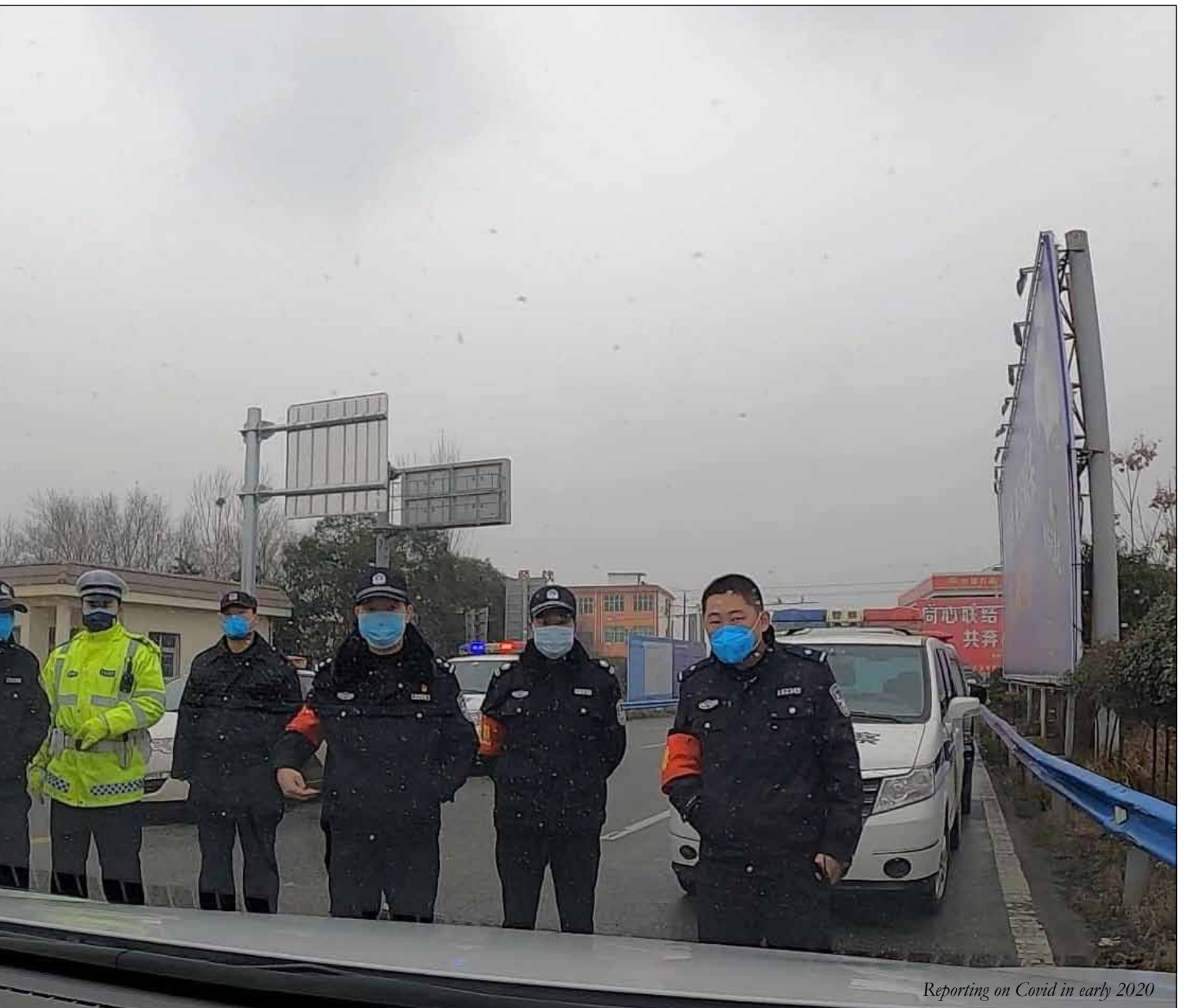
When the programme was being made, Ed says it 'completely changed my interest in what I wanted to do.' Prior to this experience he had looked at a range of career possibilities from advertising and PR to joining

the police or military. However, the process of making the programme segment, which he says took up the best part of a year, was what really fascinated him. The job of trying to investigate something and trying to check facts and trying to dig beneath the surface of a story gripped him, and it soon became his career choice.

He says he had never been the 'traumatized kid' that he might have been if his father had left at a later age. He remembers a wonderful upbringing with his mother. But as he had no memories of his father ever being part of his life, it was more the knowledge that this man had been 'up to some questionable things' and taken money from 'vulnerable people' that bothered him and drove him. Therefore, the



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Reporting on Covid in early 2020

process of doing something about that, and other things like it, became his focus. He went on to do a TV degree at Bournemouth and a story that he and colleagues put together covering an election was so successful that the college commissioned him to do further pieces.

After leaving with his degree, it wasn't a straightforward trajectory to his full-time position with the BBC. After a long spell washing up in The Half Moon at Melplash in Dorset while trying to find work in the industry, Ed gradually made new contacts and picked up bits of work. In time, navigating the world of freelance TV gave him an enormous amount of experience that, over many years, included working for ITV, Al Jazeera, Australian TV and even filming the then Prince of Wales and his brother

And a lot of people had learned the hard way from SARS that you want to stay inside, and you want to wear a mask.' He was working with veteran reporter Stephen McDonnell and remembers there was a 'really strange atmosphere' and suddenly they found the road blocked by 'a line of SWAT team cops stood across the road'. The police told them that they were locking down the whole of Hubei province with an estimated 58 million people inside. They were told it was OK to enter but they would not be allowed out again.

'So we drove in' says Ed 'and a few miles down the road were met by people in hazmat suits.' He remembers they were spraying things and taking temperatures while he filmed out the window. He described it as 'kind of crazy, it was like *Star Trek*.' It was at that point he says, 'we realized

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Harry for the Press Association. He also helped produce a 1-hour documentary about Laura Kuenssberg on Brexit. It was during the Laura Kuenssberg job that he was asked by a BBC producer to apply for a position with them in Shanghai. He was offered the job and after a year waiting for a visa he packed 'seven suitcases' and flew to China. He remembers it as 'incredibly daunting' but also as 'an opportunity I wasn't going to say no to.'

The first story he did was about the rise in secondhand car ownership in China. 'A lot of people don't have secondhand cars' he says. 'It's frowned upon. You have a brand-new car in China. It's a status symbol.' That was followed by a piece about swine fever which he recalls was 'ravaging across China at the time'. Although it had been a difficult story to get to, Ed managed to venture out to interview and film some of the people affected. He now recalls it as 'one of my standout pieces from China, nearly five years later.' He says his colleague and local assistant were 'very lucky' to get out and film the whole piece themselves.

While on a Christmas break in the UK he got a call from the bureau chief saying they wanted him to go to Wuhan to report on some 'strange virus thing'. He laughed with his family and friends in the UK about how it would be something that would go away in a short time. On returning, he went to Beijing before travelling to Wuhan and describes his first interaction with Covid in China: 'We're in this village in the middle of nowhere, there's no one around, it's all deserted. Partly because it was Chinese New Year, but also partly because it's the start of Covid.

something quite serious was going on here. It was very, very weird. We were trying to get to Wuhan.'

As they spoke to someone who had been put in a hospital but didn't know if he had Covid, they were stopped by more police and a communist party official. After much discussion, although they were not supposed to be allowed out, their presence was deemed more undesirable than concerns about virus transmission. They were escorted by police and communist party official cars for three hours before reaching the border out of Hubei. As Ed observed, they basically said 'we're going to break our own rules, get rid of the BBC, we're gonna get you out of here.' To top it off when they reached the border out of Hubei Province, Ed, having not changed out of his thermal clothing and having been lugging a heavy camera and equipment around for hours registered red when a temperature gun was pointed at him on the way out. He didn't have Covid and they waved him on but due to China's 'zero Covid' policy they sealed the borders and he was effectively stuck in China for nearly two years afterwards.

Ed Lawrence's experience in China has been a huge learning curve but with such a massive country becoming his sole focus, it's not surprising that he is aware of its importance on the world stage. 'I think everyone's been very focused on Russia for the last 30 years' he says, 'and you may argue rightly so, now with what's going on in Ukraine, but I think it's been at a detriment to resources and focus and understanding on other parts of the world.' Ed says there's been a sudden wake up to China and agrees



Filming with the outgoing Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen

that the administration is projecting itself globally in ways that concern many countries. 'But I also feel when I talk to people in various governments, foreign governments and government here, there's a real lack of China expertise and understanding. There's a real void.' He says many countries 'haven't been doing the legwork because they've been looking at the former Soviet Union.' So he sees this sudden wake up as fundamentally a good thing. 'Because I think more people should try and understand China. I think China is a fantastic place. People are fantastic, and as with any country, the government is not necessarily representative of the people. And you can say that in any nation.'

He has many friends in China now and says they are 'frankly, the future.' However, that 'future' may be leaving China itself. Ed tells me a lot of his Chinese friends are leaving the country. 'A lot of them have been seeking opportunities overseas' he says. 'Some of my friends are going off and doing master's degrees, even if they've already got one. Often in the UK. Some other friends have gone to the US to do master's degrees with the hope of getting jobs there and staying there. Some of it's economic, some of it's political.'

The exodus is not just a brain drain. 'Global brands, global chains are moving their production out of China. Not completely out of China, but they're diversifying. They're also opening up factories in Vietnam and India,

because China can be quite volatile now, as a market. You don't know what sanction is going to come next from the US government. And you don't know, geopolitically, if China suddenly has a beef with your country whether you're gonna face the flak for it as a company from that country. And so they're trying to diversify their chains a bit more.'

Ed believes more people should try and understand China. 'Even if they don't like what they're understanding, they should try and understand how China thinks, how China works.' He sees China as 'the big global story' but points out that 'it's immensely difficult to work and operate there. But we're there. And I think it's really important to be there. Even if we can only do a small amount, compared to colleagues in other countries, we're still doing something.'

His final comment may point to the importance of any effort being made to understand what such a global giant is thinking. 'The thing that I love about China is every province is almost like a different country' he says. 'It's all China, but they've got different dialects, they've got different food, different history, different ethnicities. Every province is like a different country. You can fly from minus 40 to plus 40—it's still in China.'

In the past there was a saying that if the US sneezes the world catches a cold. That saying has lately been applied to China, and with good reason.