



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Fixing the fixer dynamic: towards respectful and accurate coverage of Taiwan

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December 2024
Michaelmas Term
Sponsor: SPH Media

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Preface

This report was prepared by *The Straits Times*' Taiwan Correspondent, Wai Yee Yip. It is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by SPH Media.

Wai Yee has worked as a journalist for 14 years. She covered entertainment news, technology, and social media in a career spanning positions at both *The Straits Times* and BBC News before transitioning to work as a foreign correspondent.

Introduction

In January last year, over 430 journalists from around the world converged in Taiwan to cover its 2024 presidential election – believed to be the highest number of foreign reporters to visit at one time since the young democracy first began holding direct presidential elections 28 years ago.

The surge in international media interest in the event was unsurprising given the island home of 23 million people is often framed as one of the world’s most dangerous flashpoints.

Cross-strait tensions between Taipei and Beijing had soared to their highest in decades, and we were told the election result would have far-reaching implications for the wider world. As the *New York Times* put it, this poll was one “that could reshape global affairs”, while CNN echoed that it “could change the world” by altering the delicate and complicated balance between Taiwan, China, and the United States.

Beijing claims self-ruled Taiwan as its territory. It’s a claim rejected in Taipei, but China has never ruled out the use of military force to achieve “reunification”. The U.S. is Taiwan’s most important foreign backer – and arms supplier – even in the absence of formal diplomatic ties.

The journalists who flew into Taiwan to cover this crucial vote hailed from vastly different countries and cultural backgrounds. But the one thing many of them had in common was their need to work with Taiwanese fixers.

Fixers are locally based media employees whom journalists hire to help them cover international news. They play vital roles in helping foreign reporters do everything from setting up interviews to translation work and logistical arrangements. Their contributions are rarely made known to news audiences, and their labour is largely considered “underground”.¹

In the case of Taiwan’s presidential election, a fixer’s scope of work typically involved securing key interviews about voting trends and campaign talking points

¹ Palmer, L. (2019). *The Fixers: Local News Workers' Perspectives on International Reporting*. Oxford University Press.

with relevant officials, ordinary residents, and political analysts, as well as booking transportation services and sourcing interview venues.

Unfortunately, some of the newly established working relationships between foreign journalists and Taiwanese fixers during the election period ended on a sour note.

Besides engaging in unfair pay practices and showing a lack of respect for fixers' time and opinions, some foreign reporters attempted to pressure fixers into assisting in the production of sensationalist stories with preconceived angles. They sought click-worthy stories reflecting an imagined panic and alarm among the Taiwanese public about the possibility of an imminent Chinese invasion.

Taiwanese American journalist Clarissa Wei, who has experience working as a fixer for foreign media outlets in Taiwan, wrote in a February 2024 [Foreign Policy](#) essay that short-term, visiting journalists covering the Taiwanese election often distorted the reality on the ground.²

“They depict the island as the centrepiece of a drama that they’ve already made up their minds about, often inflating tensions and asking leading questions for heightened effect. And the fixers are brought on as the stagehands, charged with providing the backdrop for pre-written narratives,” she wrote.

A month before Wei’s article, an anonymous [joint statement](#) was issued on X by Taiwanese fixers and stringers, and shared by influential Taiwan media figures.³ The 300-word statement said they had encountered “numerous unfavourable experiences” with foreign journalists during the election period.

“These experiences include exerting pressure on interviewees to obtain specific questions, abrupt cancellations of interviews at the last minute without any

² Wei, C. (2024) ‘What the Western media gets wrong about Taiwan’, *Foreign Policy*, 21 February. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/21/taiwan-news-china-western-media-cross-straight-tensions-war/> (Accessed: 17 January 2025).

³ Chen, G. [@george_chen] (2024) Taiwanese fixers issue joint statement detailing "numerous unfavourable experiences" with foreign journalists during the election period. X, 23 January. Available at: https://x.com/george_chen/status/1746558354930225416/photo/1 (Accessed: 17 January 2025).

explanation, frequent requests for free services under the guise of ‘helping Taiwan's voice be heard’, absence of payment, or insistence on charging less with the argument that ‘Asian countries are not that expensive’, and a lack of communication regarding the angle of the articles, among other issues.”

While unfair power dynamics between foreign journalists and local fixers is in [no way unique to Taiwan](#), it is worth giving the issue scrutiny from a Taiwanese perspective given the ever-growing international media interest in the island.⁴

After the election of President Lai Ching-te from the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party – whom Beijing distrusts and frequently brands a “separatist” – cross-strait tensions have only ratcheted further up. On the other side of the globe, President Donald Trump’s return to the White House introduces new unpredictability to the Taiwan Strait’s future dynamics.

What we can predict is that foreign journalists will continue to swarm there to cover life inside the geopolitical hot pocket, and many will require the expertise and networks of local fixers to do their jobs. How, then, can the working relationship between foreign journalists and Taiwan fixers be improved?

To begin to answer this question, I conducted around 11 hours of interviews with seven fixers in Taiwan – all with varying levels of experience, ranging from two years to 15 years. All had worked with multiple foreign media outlets from around the world, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia.

In wide-ranging interviews, two main issues were highlighted repeatedly: the need for foreign journalists to not only treat fixers more fairly, but to also deliver more nuanced coverage of the Taiwan story. To do so, the fixers shared eight suggestions.

If you are a foreign journalist or editor thinking of covering Taiwan, it is worthwhile hearing from these fixers beforehand. The Taiwan story is their story, and their perspectives on best collaborative practices will help you yield better coverage.

⁴ Plaut, Klein (2019). “Fixing” the Journalist-Fixer Relationship: A Critical Look towards Developing Best Practices in Global Reporting. Retrieved from globalreportingcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/fixing-fixers-global-reporting-centre.pdf.

Why Taiwan needs a fairer narrative

Before sharing the Taiwanese fixers' eight suggestions for better coverage, it is worth pausing to understand what is at stake for Taiwan.

Associate Professor Su Chiaoning is a journalism studies researcher at Oakland University who has written extensively about Taiwan's nation branding.

“Geopolitical strategies involving cross-strait relations, economic partnerships, and defence measures depend on a genuine understanding of Taiwan's political landscape, public sentiment, and cultural context,” she told me. “Misconceptions or biased narratives can lead to poorly informed policies that may escalate tensions or overlook Taiwan's contributions and needs.”

Amplifying Taiwan's international visibility is especially pertinent given the island's diplomatic isolation on the world stage. Taipei has been left with only 12 diplomatic allies as Beijing has sought to leverage its political and economic clout to isolate the island in the international arena, and exclude it from participation in international organisations and diplomacy.

“This isolation can create a sense of erasure on the global stage, despite Taiwan's significant cultural, economic, and political influence. Fair and accurate storytelling helps counter this marginalisation by giving Taiwan the visibility it lacks in formal diplomatic arenas and amplifying its presence in the global community,” said Dr Su.

“Accurate narratives empower the Taiwanese, affirming their identity and legitimising their voices on the international stage,” she added.

This is something keenly felt by Taiwanese fixer Edison Tseng, who said that the way foreign media constantly paint Taiwan – as nothing more than a scary danger zone – has made him question the standards of journalistic integrity upheld by some outlets, including truth, accuracy, and objectivity.

“I understand that foreign journalists want to tell Taiwan's story in relation to China, because that's where the geopolitical tension lies. And, yes, I agree that that tense situation is an important story to tell. But when we look at the ratio of stories

being told about Taiwan, it's significantly unbalanced – as if there's nothing else going on in Taiwan,” he said.

“It's incredibly unfortunate that we rarely get to see a true representation of the whole of Taiwan in international media,” he added, noting that it is “frustrating” to him not just as a Taiwanese person, but as a global citizen.

“It makes me wonder how much of what we know about any country is limited to only the selected few editors and journalists in the newsroom – that they have so much power to decide the kind of narrative they wish to portray about a country and its people,” he said.

Four steps toward fairer coverage

Foreign journalists often arrive in Taiwan with a preconceived checklist of stories, my interviewees said. Remarkably, no matter where they come from or which outlet they work for, this checklist is near-identical.

At the top of this list is the question of whether the Taiwanese are ready to fight in a potential conflict with China. This often translates into requests for footage and interviews showing residents either in panic mode or learning to defend themselves by taking up weapons training classes en masse – neither of which reflect reality, said Hugo Peng.

Then there are frequent requests to interview people about their cultural identity, particularly whether they feel Taiwanese or Chinese. Finally, foreign journalists often focus on stories about semiconductor chips – the essential components in ubiquitous devices such as mobile phones and laptops – of which Taiwan is a world-leading manufacturer.

“These are always the three stories that all visiting journalists request to do,” said Peng. “In a way it’s good because this means that it’s quite easy because I know what they want. But at the same time it’s absurd that these are the only things that people care about in relation to Taiwan.”

Fixers told me they would be less fatigued by these recycled narratives if foreign journalists weren’t seeking to fake a fresh angle or sensational headline through embellishment or misrepresentation.

Jonah Khu’s first job as a fixer in 2022, for example, involved looking for female soldiers for a story to be published in a French women’s magazine. Ultimately, he helped the writer secure interviews with a small group of women who had the hobby of shooting at a gun range. None of them were soldiers.

“The final story suggested that all Taiwanese women are ready and actively prepared to face war. But the truth is, very few Taiwanese are actually doing much to actively prepare for war,” Khu said.

Gladys Tsai said the misconceptions foreign media workers often have about Taiwan resulted in international journalists asking Taiwanese interviewees leading questions to fit their pre-written narratives. Two such misconceptions that keep recurring in her conversations with foreign journalists are the notions that there is a single consensus among the Taiwanese about their identity, and that the public are clearly divided between the pro-independence or pro-unification camps.

“The reality is so much more complicated than that, but foreign journalists often oversimplify the situation to make it easier for their audiences [to understand],” Tsai said. “For instance, when it comes to independence or unification, foreign media will ask Taiwanese people questions that only give you certain kinds of answers – like, do you choose to support A or B? But in reality, the answer could also be C or D, right?”

Faced with these misconceptions, fixers said they would try to voice their opinions to correct factual biases as much as possible. But the foreign journalists do not always heed their advice.

A 2019 paper on this topic by Shayna Plaut and Peter Klein for the [Global Reporting Centre](#) suggests journalists are rarely conscious of the role fixers can play in framing stories. Instead, there is an unfair power dynamic that favours the journalist, not just in Taiwan but around the world.⁵

“We don’t even know when the story is published sometimes because the journalists don’t send it to us after the job is done. It would be nice if they could check not just the facts with us first, but also in terms of translations, because certain words with multiple meanings can become mistranslated,” said Tsai. “But I would say that this almost never happens.”

1. Do your homework before you land in Taiwan

The bare minimum my interviewees asked of foreign journalists was to do research before arriving in Taiwan: read up on the local news and have at least a basic understanding of the issues – something that is, surprisingly, not always done.

⁵ Plaut, Klein (2019). “Fixing” the Journalist-Fixer Relationship: A Critical Look towards Developing Best Practices in Global Reporting. Retrieved from globalreportingcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/fixing-fixers-global-reporting-centre.pdf.

Tsai told me how some foreign journalists would ask her to produce a list of subjects from her pocket, with the assumption that she would be the one to come up with the stories and interviewees for them off the top of her head.

“Some of them can’t even locate Taiwan on the map,” she said. “To me, that’s a lousy [attitude] – I’m willing to help you but at the end of the day, it’s your piece, so you have to do your part for me to better assist you.”

2. Do not force the angle

After doing the research, foreign journalists should be prepared that story angles they had in mind before arriving in Taiwan may not always pan out the way they expected – and that is OK. It is logical to go into a story with some direction in mind, but if interviewees end up saying things that do not necessarily match the planned angle, journalists should accept that to be the case, rather than attempt to force the angle.

In hindsight, Khu, the fixer who worked with the French women’s magazine writer, said he should have been more insistent that the story she was looking for did not reflect reality. “I was more naive at the time since it was my first job, but I wouldn’t take on that assignment now, given the choice. What she was looking for is not the situation on the ground, which is not right,” he said.

Jeff Wang, who works as a fixer for major television documentary productions, noted how some foreign journalists cannot wrap their heads around the fact that life is thriving and goes on as per normal in Taiwan.

“They always expect that all Taiwanese are terrified about war, but the fact is that we have been dealing with cross-strait threats for more than 70 years. So I will always tell the journalists that we will ask the questions they want but we may not get what they’re looking for, and they just have to accept that and try to think of an alternative approach,” he said. “As a Taiwanese fixer, I have principles, and that is to only tell the truth.”

3. Verify facts with the fixer

In the same vein, it would be ideal to verify facts with the fixer as one puts the story together. As Tsai already mentioned, words often get lost in translation, so it helps to double-check to paint the most accurate picture.

“The word ‘Chinese’, for example, can be interpreted to mean many different things. Some Western journalists will ask a Taiwanese if they feel Chinese, and when he says ‘yes’, the journalist assumes that it means this person identifies with China and wants unification,” she recalled.

“But this person could just mean that he or she sees themselves only as ethnically or culturally Chinese, but still see themselves as a Republic of China [Taiwan] citizen.”

What to call Taiwan?

The naming of Taiwan is a contentious issue tied to geopolitics and history:

- Official name: Taiwan is officially the "Republic of China (ROC)" since the ROC government relocated to the island in 1949 after the Chinese Civil War.
- Taiwan: Commonly used to reflect the island’s distinct identity and its de facto independence.
- Chinese Taipei: A compromise name used in international forums like the Olympics due to pressure from Beijing.
- International recognition: Many countries and organisations avoid recognising Taiwan as a sovereign state, largely to maintain diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC).
- Local preferences: Many Taiwanese identify as “Taiwanese”, rejecting labels like “Chinese Taipei” that imply affiliation with mainland China.

The choice of terminology often reflects political stances and sensitivities, requiring careful consideration of context and audience.

4. Be open to telling other untold stories

While fixers understand the need for “big picture” geopolitical stories – especially from visiting journalists who are on assignment in Taiwan for a limited amount of time – it does not hurt to be open to less typical stories about the island if budget and time allows.

Edison Tseng said he always tries to suggest stories dealing with human rights issues, such as LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, and Taiwan’s migrant worker communities. “These are universal issues that people from any culture can relate to, and they’re important stories,” he said. “We need to give these people voices, otherwise what’s the point of journalism? It’s important to do stories about politics and what the government is saying, but we should also look beyond elitist narratives when we can.”

Claire Ko, a veteran fixer of 15 years for major television productions, said one of the best projects she worked on with foreign journalists in recent years was about Taiwanese wildlife. The big-budget documentary involved a month of travelling around Taiwan in search of the native Taiwanese black bear. “It’s just so cool to know that some foreign journalists want to tell different stories of Taiwan, to show that we have so much diversity to offer,” she said.

Four steps toward fairer treatment

Most of the fixers I interviewed took on the profession not by design but “by accident” in response to the steady increase of international media attention in Taiwan over the years.

While there are no statistics to confirm the number of fixers working in Taiwan today, all seven interviewees gave anecdotal evidence that the number has grown substantially over the past two years, ever since then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made a controversial visit to Taipei in August 2022. A WhatsApp support group for young fixers entering the field in 2022 – co-formed by Khu – has attracted 20 members since it was set up.

Khu said the informal chat group shares openly and regularly about fair rates, pay practices, and other relevant information. Meanwhile, Peng has given talks at a local university about the inner workings of being a fixer, with the goal of nurturing the next generation of those interested in joining the line of work.

My interviewees highlighted four areas in which they would like to receive fairer treatment. But, to be clear, they are not helpless victims: they have autonomy and will exercise the right not to work with certain journalists.

Claire Ko told me she rejects job offers when they are “near-impossible” to deliver – for example, requests for interviews with a high-level government official with little to no lead time. “I know Taiwan is a small place, but we do have certain processes to follow here and foreign journalists shouldn’t expect that they can just get whatever they want, whenever they want,” she said.

Still, fixers spoke of a hierarchy at play between them and the journalists who hire them: they are not treated as members of a team but as an additional cost or glorified personal assistants.

“When everyone keeps calling you a fixer and only a fixer, you don’t feel qualified to call yourself a journalist, even though I’m really doing a journalist’s job,” said Wu Xin-yun, who started work as a fixer in 2022. “This is where it really helps when foreign journalists give me a byline in some of their final work, because it makes me feel like it gives me more credibility.”

Other fixers were less concerned about being given a byline credit, with Peng saying he deemed it “a bonus”. Khu also said he cares less about receiving a byline than he does about ensuring the final piece that goes out is done well. When the final work is good, he can share it on social media and promote his services.

And those services are both valuable and require skill to deliver: such as securing interviews with high-level politicians, including Taiwan President Lai.

“It’s like journalists expect me to take their hands and just walk into the Presidential Office together,” said Tsai. “It’s not like I go to the United States and expect that anyone can get me an interview with the president whenever I like, so I’m confused why they assume it would be possible for Taiwan.”

Peng quipped: “Journalists think that since we are fixers, our role is to fix everything. But if we can do so much, we wouldn’t be fixers. We would be working for MI6.”

These frustrations and challenges surrounding the way they are treated underscores the need for more equitable and respectful working relationships between foreign journalists and fixers in Taiwan. To address these issues, the fixers I interviewed identified four actionable steps that could lead to stronger collaboration.

1. Give adequate lead time and detailed pitches

The fixers I interviewed agreed that detailed story pitches, delivered well ahead of arrival in Taiwan, were helpful. Depending on the scale of the project proposal, good lead time might be several months before the arrival date. With good detail and time, fixers said they were better able to assess whether requests are achievable and come up with alternative solutions if not.

Aside from the story details, the pitch should also include operational details: such as how many stories they are looking to produce, how much time they plan to spend in Taiwan, and whether they are willing to travel outside of the capital Taipei.

Tsai said she appreciates it when foreign journalists share web links to stories or other things that they had seen beforehand about Taiwan. “It’s helpful to share those things to start the conversation, for fixers to know what made you interested in Taiwan and want to come here in the first place,” she said.

2. Show cultural sensitivity

Foreign journalists arriving in Taiwan should understand and respect that certain ways of working may not work as expected. For example, fixers spoke about how some journalists believed that being wilfully persistent would get them what they want. That is simply not how things work in Taiwan.

Wang said one journalist who was hoping to secure an interview with the foreign minister pressured him to keep calling the minister's office until a time and date was locked down. "They just kept pushing and pushing me, but ultimately I had to tell them that this is not how we do things in Taiwan. They needed to respect that the foreign minister just didn't have an available time slot at that time."

Ko mentioned how some foreign journalists believed throwing more money at a problem would get them anything they want. "Some journalists want a certain interview at a certain location, and when I say no, they'll be like, 'Can't you just pay them some money?' No, we cannot do that – that's a huge insult to the Taiwanese people. Money is not everything."

Tsai echoed frustration with a kind of entitled behaviour. "Some major Western publications come into Taiwan and think that Taiwanese should all be so grateful to them for helping to tell our story internationally, and that we should kowtow to them because we're so small in comparison. But I refuse, and I think that's not right," she said.

3. Pay on time

Having a timely payment system for fixers' compensation should be a given, but this is not being practised by many foreign media organisations. Nearly all of the fixers I spoke to said that they had encountered situations in which they faced months-long payment delays.

Peng once had to wait for six months to get paid for a job. "That's not the right way to treat someone who has done so much hard work for you. Foreign journalists always ask us to do so many things urgently, and we try our best, but when it comes to paying us, there is no urgency," he said.

Tsai added: "There have been instances where I spent more time chasing journalists for my pay than the actual work I did, which made it all not very worthwhile."

Compensating workers on time may not be within a journalists' control but there is a responsibility to follow through, instead of disappearing after redirecting queries to colleagues in the finance department. "These finance people have never met us and they don't care about us," said Tsai. "Meanwhile, the journalists have already gotten all the material they wanted to get from us."

4. Adopt a rights-based approach to working with fixers

Taiwan is not a warzone and its crime rate is relatively low, so it's easy to assume that journalistic work there would always be safe. The reality is that certain stories will still put fixers in a compromising situation.

Tsai spoke of being asked to secure an interview with the head of an organised crime group. "These people kill people," she said, "and I'm just not comfortable with getting in touch and giving out my personal information. The journalists who made these requests are more concerned about getting a sensational or exciting story, but after they return to their home countries, I'm the one still living in Taiwan as a regular citizen."

As freelancers, fixers are typically not offered insurance and other benefits that might mediate risks. "Some foreign journalists ask me, 'If war broke out tomorrow, how far would you be willing to go for work?' But I'm not given insurance or other protection, so I would say I would not risk my life," Tsai said. "I want to do things for Taiwan, but not in this tragic, heroic way."

Take note of personal safety considerations on assignment, not just for yourself, but for the fixer as well.

And adopt the fair labour practices you would expect of your own employer: not forcing fixers to work extended hours without breaks, or pressuring them to secure interviews and meetings with subjects they feel uncomfortable with.

Some larger media organisations with more budget offer to cover insurance for fixers, which is ideal but still rare. But as both Peng and Tsai noted, fixers should really be seen as assets, rather than costs.

Conclusion

In my own two-and-a-half years of living in Taiwan and representing their stories for my news outlet in Singapore, I've been lucky to explore facets of this society that are fresh and exciting – not just for me, but for my readers, too.

For example: how a sleepy town outside Taipei [once produced 80% of the world's Barbie dolls](#), and was critical in shaping the identity of former factory girls who found financial independence making the toy; or the fact that [gender equality in Taiwan](#) is surprisingly superficial, despite the island having one of Asia's highest female representation in politics.

While I continued to cover the usual geopolitical stories on a regular basis – and those stories are certainly significant – I also had the privilege of uncovering stories outside of the usual, simply by talking to as many Taiwanese residents as possible.

That meant going well beyond establishing contacts with the typical government officials and academic experts, and striking up conversations with that ambitious-but-disillusioned young part-timer at the neighbourhood convenience store, the yoga instructor who feels societal pressure to get married, and the elderly man who still harbours hopes of Taiwan “reuniting” with China, despite Beijing's military intimidation and increasingly bellicose rhetoric against his hometown.

By telling these atypical stories, I believe I am helping to amplify Taiwanese voices on the world stage, and capturing aspects of their lives which are, more often than not, reduced to “cross-strait tensions”.

When international media attention is drawn to Taiwan, the demands we make of fixers increases. And the work we produce can be powerful and consequential.

There's a reason so many foreign journalists arrive in Taiwan with inaccurate preconceptions or pre-determined objectives: it is because of the prior work of our peers. “When foreign journalists see other international reporters covering topics such as those related to conflict, they feel compelled to follow suit,” said Wang.

The gift of a fixer who can point out these weaknesses is invaluable. “My role is to work with them in capturing a more accurate story of Taiwan,” said Wang. “And I

believe it's a privilege to represent Taiwanese people and showcase our community to the world through our work – after all, we've been overlooked internationally for far too long.”

When we do our research before we arrive in Taiwan and remain open to untold stories – taking feedback from fixers on unworkable angles and misunderstood facts or quotations – our stories will contribute to a more nuanced global view of an ongoing and geopolitically significant situation.

And when we empower our fixers with detailed pitches, fair and timely pay, and safe and ethical treatment as members of culturally intelligent teams, we're doubling our capacity to meet that challenge.

Taiwan's story is their story to tell. Let's help them tell it well.