

Anna Sophie Loewenberg has spent decades reporting on China for media outlets such as AP Horizons, NPR and VPRO Metropolis. She is the co-creator of the *Sexy Beijing* series. Her online documentaries have been reviewed by CNN.com, Timesonline, and Newyorker.com and have over 15 million views worldwide. She holds a master's from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Her course "[Creative Voices in China: From the Underground to the Internet](#)" begins on Monday, January 28.

### **What brought you to Beijing, and how long did you live there?**

I moved to Beijing in 1996 and lived there for the better part of 20 years. I first moved there because I had always been curious about China—I have family history there. In 1933, my father and grandparents, who were German Jews, fled Hamburg. It was the year Hitler came to power and my father was only 6-weeks old when they left on a long journey by sea to China. They lived in Shanghai until the Japanese attacked in 1937, when they fled again, this time to the United States. There were always these tales of their life there and the photographs by my grandfather; for me it was only a distant image in black-and-white, the mythical land that had saved my family. I jumped at the opportunity to go to China with a volunteer organization when I graduated from college and left three weeks later. I was teaching in a Chinese university. At that time there weren't many private universities like there are today, so it was still very much a privilege to attend university. I very soon started working in media: even during that first year I was writing about the music scene there for some local and overseas publications and that's where my career in media and journalism began.

### **How did the *Sexy Beijing* series come about?**

That was so fun. Before *Sexy Beijing*, I had worked for a magazine called *Beijing Scene*, which was the first English-language magazine of its kind in post-Mao Beijing. It was an English-language weekly that covered the arts, innovators and the cultural scene in Beijing, which was the cultural center of the country at the time. I was on the arts and entertainment desk and my editor was Jeremy Goldkorn—he now hosts the *Sinica* podcast and is the editor for *Supchina*. We worked together for two years on *Beijing Scene* until it was shut down by the Chinese government in 2000. One day the police came to our office and confiscated everything and arrested Scott Savitt, our editor-in-chief and the author of *Crashing the Party*, a memoir he wrote about that time. We all went our separate ways for a while. I quickly left the country and went to study in New York for a couple of years.

After I had been in the states for a few years, I just had to get back to Beijing. Jeremy Goldkorn was living there, and he was working with a dear friend of mine from college, Luke Mines, running a production company they called "Goldmines." When I found this out I quit my job, sold my car, left my boyfriend, and in 2006, I went back to Beijing to run Goldmines with them. On my second or third day back in Beijing we were sitting around brainstorming, and we started talking about YouTube, which at the time was brand new and not yet blocked in China. We came up with the idea of *Sexy Beijing* because *Sex and the City* was a popular at the time with 20-something white-collar Chinese women, and often people would stop me in the street and ask if I was that lady from *Sex and the City*. Also, we were all in our early thirties and still single. So we decided to riff off of that... One of the things about living in China and speaking Chinese is that folks like to get intimate with you pretty quickly, like they want to know all about us strange foreigners, so there are some great interactions on the street. As a journalist I was always out there chatting people up, and on a daily basis I would get these questions like "Where's your husband?" and "Where are your kids?" People were very curious, so I thought "Why not flip this around? Let's do a show called *Sexy Beijing*. I'll play the Carrie Bradshaw character and let's make it about relationships and gender and issues and how they are changing now." That

same day Luke and I went out and started interviewing people on the street and it was hilarious and enlightening. We learned a lot about Chinese culture through people's intimate relationships, even from simple questions like "How did you meet your partner?" or "Could you give me some advice about love?" It was really telling, and things just took off from there.

At the same time, we also produced a show hosted by Jeremy called "The Hard Hat show" as well as a music and arts show. It was important to continue documenting people who were making a statement through the arts in China. From the 1990s through the *Sexy Beijing* era, there were always these amazing Chinese innovators, artists and creators, people who were brave and insightful. Our mission was to document all of it.

**You already mentioned one of the complications of living with censorship with the offices of *Beijing Scene* getting shut down. What were some of the other intricacies of producing media content in China?**

I don't know what it's like now because we left a little under a year ago and a lot has changed politically and in terms of cultural expression. I had stopped filming three or four years before we left. I don't know whether there are people there doing what we did, because it's much harder to get a visa and there are tougher restrictions now in general. Back when *Beijing Scene* was shut down, we all kind of fled and our editor-in-chief was in jail for a few days but then they let him go. I think we would have been in deeper trouble if it happened today. But even back then, we were always aware that for Chinese folks there was a dark cloud and this heavy hand; even for people we interviewed, we knew there could be real consequences. In those days we all kind of learned how to live in the shades of gray. There was a feeling that there was a little danger out there; like what we called the "net Nanny" censoring the Internet. That had real implications for us because when our shows became very popular on YouTube and we had a huge following they blocked our website, YouTube, Twitter, and all these platforms we were using.

Also, in the day-to-day, you never knew when the police were going to show up at your doorstep and say "This housing is not for foreigners. You need to get out in 24 hours." That happened to me a few times. It shakes your confidence, as does the sense that what you're building, whether it's a production company or a creative endeavor, can be shut-down at any moment.

**You started work in Beijing just as the Internet was taking off. Could you say a few words about the impact of the Internet on popular culture and on freedom of expression in China?**

From where I stand, the Internet has been everything. It has completely changed the collective consciousness in China, starting with young people and now, everyone. For example, during the 1990s, when I was involved in the music scene in Beijing, musicians couldn't get music from the West. People would listen to the same CD over and over. Every artist was hungry to know what was going on in the rest of the world. There was really that feeling of an iron curtain blocking people from new things, fresh voices. It was the same with books and any other kind of access to information.

When the Internet came it changed everything. Just in my world of artists and musicians, more people were speaking English and they had access to a whole new world of information. It changed Chinese design, music, literature, everything. In some ways a lot of things became more commercial and less interesting, but people became savvy very quickly. With access not only to the Internet in general, but also social media, suddenly, most young people in China knew more about what was going on in the world than I did. It gave people educational resources, knowledge, the ability to communicate and even organize where there had been so little access. Ai Weiwei is another example of that: it was his campaign on social media that

attracted attention about what was going on after the Sichuan earthquake and the pressure the government was putting on him.

**You came back to the United States about a year ago. What brought you back, and what are some of your current projects?**

So — spoiler alert — I did find love, which is part of what killed the *Sexy Beijing* project, I had my kids in Beijing. What brought us back was the pollution, kind of ironic since we have been using our air purifiers we brought back from Beijing during the big California fires in November. The pollution was getting so serious in Beijing: 400 and 500 AQI, just off the charts. During my daughter's first year of life there was a full month in Beijing that the smog alerts were so high that we couldn't leave our apartment. Days like this [with an AQI of 190] in the Bay Area are like clean air days in Beijing. It was getting surreal to see everyone with face masks, and every two or three weeks you had to shut your life down. So that was really hard.

As for current projects, I'm launching a few audio podcasts. First I'm launching a Mandarin-language two-way; it's a conversation between myself and a Chinese gal. She's the Beijing-born American, and I'm the American Beijinger, so we come with two different perspectives on life in America. I'm also working on a couple of other podcasts, including one on popular culture in China.