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To the Judges:

The Associated Press is nominating Beijing-based correspondent Gerry Shih and China photo editor Han Guan Ng for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics for their excellent coverage of the Uighurs, a Muslim ethnic minority living under severe repression in China.

### *The Stories*

Shih and Ng's reporting in Xinjiang, a region in far western China, detailed how Chinese authorities are [subjecting Uighurs](#) in their homeland to enforced disappearances into indoctrination camps and blanket surveillance enabled by facial- and voice-recognition technologies and DNA collection. Shih also traveled to Turkey and landed rare and extensive interviews with Uighurs who had [joined extremist fighters in Syria](#) in the hope of someday freeing their people as well as older Uighur exiles trying to [fend off the pull of jihad](#).

The stories highlight how China's restrictive measures on an ethnic minority of 10 million people have set in motion a cycle of repression and violence. Links to the full series, which include photos by Ng, are included at the end of this letter.

### *Conflicting Values*

Shih and Ng traveled to Xinjiang in November to document the new disappearances and high-tech restrictions that have effectively sealed off the region over the past year. China is generally not welcoming of foreign media reports critical of its policies in Xinjiang — and punishes many of those who speak to foreign reporters. Shih and Ng were exceedingly mindful of the potential risks people in this region face and sought to the greatest extent possible not to cause harm in the process of uncovering this important — and often underreported — story.

### *Identities*

Shih had learned from sources outside China of a Uighur college student who was [spirited away into an indoctrination camp](#) where he was feared beaten to death. Despite only having the name of the man and that of the village he came from, Shih and Ng were able to track down his mother in her home outside the city of Korla.

The woman wept at the sight of photographs of the young man Shih showed her on his mobile phone, and confirmed that he was her son and that she had not heard any news of him in months.

However, their conversation was quickly interrupted by the woman's brother, who entered the house and pleaded with Shih and Ng not to interview the woman because it would bring their family trouble from the authorities. The man then left the house in a hurry, seemingly afraid of being even vaguely associated with the reporters. His fear was palpable.

Through a translator, the woman said she wanted more information about her son and wanted to talk to the reporters but was afraid it would make life worse for her family. Her husband had also already been taken away. She said she couldn't take the risk. The reporters respected her decision and left the house shortly after.

The question that arose from this encounter was whether the young man should even be identified in the story, given the apprehension his mother felt about the harm that could be caused by her

being seen as talking to foreign reporters. His sister was also avoiding contact despite Shih's repeated efforts to reach her through those who know her.

The editorial advantage of named subjects is clear: it brings greater credibility to the reporting. However, Uighur, Tibetan and free press activists have noted that [harsh punishments are often meted out](#) to people who speak to the foreign media in China. A Han Chinese man was recently sentenced to [19 years in prison](#) for tweets and for talking to foreign reporters about the plight of the Uighurs. Dozens of Uighurs are believed jailed for talking to foreign reporters.

We decided there was a reasonable threat to this family's freedom and that that outweighed the importance of a named source. The fact that the family had refused to be interviewed and expressed their fears to Shih and Ng directly when they had met was a key factor. A lengthy detention of Shih and Ng later by police from the area was another.

Instead, we decided that we would add biographical and other personal details that described the student's link to his mother as a way of conveying how these disappearances are affecting Uighur families – the ultimate point that the reporting sought to convey.

Shih went back to the student's friends and talked to them at length to flesh out the man's profile in the story, verifying each detail with at least two sources. While doing so, Shih was mindful of not providing details that would have identified these sources, who also had families in Xinjiang at risk of official retaliation.

#### *Police demands*

Shortly after the visit to the mother's house, Korla police detained Shih and Ng for 11 hours, questioning them about the objectives of their reporting in the area. They demanded that Ng show them the material on his camera, with the expectation that they would seek to delete material they considered objectionable.

Ng, in discussion with China news director Gillian Wong in Beijing, refused the police's request.

The authorities insisted that there were new unpublished regulations that cover regions like Xinjiang, which as border areas – they said – were more strictly controlled than other parts of China. Foreign reporters, the officials said, had to seek prior permission in these areas. They refused to provide these so-called regulations in writing.

The options were:

- Stand firm in our position on not allowing police to review our material and risk an even longer detention and possible arrest for defying the authorities and violating regulations that turn out to be in existence;
- Delete our images and show them a camera that has nothing particularly problematic on it, cut our losses in the area and move on to try again elsewhere to get the story;
- Show the police the material on the camera at the risk of endangering people we had talked to and allow them to delete the material. This was clearly not an actual option.

Decision:

Ng chose and stuck to the first option despite the mounting pressure that came from the police and the city's foreign affairs officials. He and Shih were finally released at 5 a.m. after 11 hours of questioning.

We chose this position because we believed in holding the Chinese authorities to their own legal standards. The Chinese government wants to project an image that it is a country that is governed according to the rule of law even though the situation on the ground often points to the contrary.

Ng's argument to the authorities was that they therefore could only make requests that were lawful. He articulated our position that the authorities should first present a legal basis on which their demand was based before we would consider it. Officially, the only part of China that

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requires prior permission for reporting access is Tibet. If there were indeed new and special regulations that required journalists to hand over material from reporting in this region, they should not exist in secret.

Ultimately, this approach paid off because the officials could not produce anything in writing – suggesting that their request was unlawful – and Ng and Shih were able to leave without compromising their material or the people in it.]

#### *A broad approach*

Shih's reporting stands out not only because he told the story of the repressive conditions of life in Xinjiang but also because he was able to track down exclusive interviews with Uighur fighters who had been fighting alongside extremists in Syria.

China has long been accused of exaggerating the threat of Uighur militancy in its country and using that to justify the extensive crackdown in the region. However, in what academics have described as a self-fulfilling prophecy, more and more Uighurs were indeed turning up in battles in Syria alongside al-Qaida.

Our ethical decision was that there was a need to also tell the story that Uighur exiles have largely sought to downplay: that some Uighurs have been drawn to extremism.

The conflicting values at the time were that such a report could either be seen as being sympathetic to violent separatists or as giving Beijing fodder for its security measures in Xinjiang. However, the broader interest in understanding this little-known yet increasingly active group of militants in Syria outweighed those concerns, and we felt that the extensive interviews Shih had with the fighters showed the link between Beijing's oppression and the militants' motivations.

Shih rounded out the series with an exclusive story about the Uighur exile community that is opposed to violence and extremism and showed how they were fighting an uphill battle in their efforts to steer their people away from jihad.

We are proud to nominate Shih and Ng for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,



Gillian Wong  
Greater China News Director  
The Associated Press  
Editor overseeing the Uighur coverage

[AP Exclusive: Digital police state shackles Chinese minority](#) Dec. 17, 2017

[AP Exclusive: Uighurs fighting in Syria take aim at China](#) Dec. 22, 2017

[AP Exclusive: China's Uighurs work to fend off pull of jihad](#) Dec. 29, 2017

[China's crackdown on Uighurs spreads to even mild critics](#) Dec. 28, 2017