Q & A

Jiayang Fan on Writing Modern China

The New Yorker writer discusses the CCP's internal logic, the psyche of Chinese nationalism, and the symbol of Hong Kong.

BY KATRINA NORTHROP — AUGUST 23, 2020

Jiayang Fan is a staff writer at The New Yorker, *where she melds political, cultural, and personal perspectives to cover China and U.S.-China relations. In recent years, she has written about hospice care in China, the Hong Kong protests, JD.com's impact on rural China, the Chinese beauty industry, and much more. This spring, in a popular episode of* The Daily, *a podcast run by* The New York Times, *she lucidly discussed the discrimination that Asian Americans have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and below, she reflects on the biases she's encountered from both China and the United States. She was born in Chongqing, China, and moved to the U.S. at the age of eight.*

Jiayang Fan
Illustration by Kate Copeland

Q: How did you first get into journalism?

A: I got into journalism by way of a fluke. I was never involved in my school newspaper in college or high school. When I landed in New York City in my early 20s, I had a vague idea that I wanted to be a writer. But I had these spectacularly useless majors — philosophy and English — and I didn't know how to convert them into marketable skills. It was by just a stroke of luck that I ended up getting a job as a fact checker at *The New Yorker*. I ran into a friend of a friend, whose girlfriend was a fact checker and needed someone to help with Chinese translation. I began helping her with a few articles written by Evan Osnos, when he was China correspondent for the magazine. In a year, I came on board as a full-time fact checker at *The New Yorker.*

At the time, I felt incredibly grateful and privileged to be working at a magazine I'd read for so long. The whole idea of reporting and writing a magazine piece was quite new and intimidating to me. So when I started at *The New Yorker*, I didn't dare think that I could ever become a journalist. It seemed just like a stroke of good luck that I got to work aside people who were doing this.

But two things became apparent to me over time. One, Chinese — this skill that I thought was almost extraneous to my being — was what had gotten me the job. As an English and philosophy major, I always thought of my Chinese as something as useless as juggling. Second, my desire to capture some truth of the world through writing, which I always thought meant poetry or fiction writing, could also be found in long-form journalism. So working at *The New Yorker*, I realized that the artistry of long-form journalism was something I wanted to investigate further and possibly pursue.

Those twin realizations made me think that perhaps I could use the skill of Chinese, which I didn't even really think of as a skill, to write about the world through my voice and to become a journalist of China that I hadn't really read before. Someone who is trying to capture what is happening in the vast and ever-evolving country, but who also is interested in the art of storytelling. And most of all, who has a relationship with China that is different from the foreign correspondents that I had read previously.

Jiayang Fan with her mother and extended family in Tiananmen Square during the spring of 1988.
Credit: Courtesy of Jiayang Fan

How is your relationship with China different from past foreign correspondents?

As an American reporter of Chinese heritage, my vantage point differs from a white American who learns Chinese as a second language. I have learned from and so admired foreign correspondents like Evan Osnos and Peter Hessler [both of whom were China correspondents for *The New Yorker*], but I knew from the outset that my voice necessarily would be different and the kind of stories I write would be a consequence of that difference.

I think a lot about what subjectivity and objectivity are in journalism. In the U.S., we've been asking ourselves recently about the difference between journalistic objectivity and moral clarity. Ever since the summer, there's been a lot of conversation about how to report on events that mean something so different for one segment of the population to another. I have thought about this question almost ever since the start of my career. Objectivity and moral clarity for me is necessarily different from someone who wasn't born in China and doesn't have their roots in China. That really informs my sense of how to be both objective, but also morally judicious to the story that I'm trying to tell.

Reporting about China, these issues are particularly complicated because the country is seen today as an adversary to the United States. So how do I present China? And how do I explain China to a readership that may not know very much about this giant on the other side of the world? How do I also infuse the telling with a sense of kinship that I feel toward this country? And how, at the end of it all, do I do justice to the facts while not failing to tell the larger truth of what has led us here? On these questions of truth and objectivity, I inevitably have to insert my subjective point of view. As a Chinese American writer, my only solution has been to openly acknowledge my relationship to China on the page rather than pretending that I am a foreign correspondent of the previous mode. I absolutely have to confess my subjectivity at the outset of a story, rather than chasing the objectivity of a previous era. My goal at the end of the day is subjectivity in service of a more comprehensive truth and moral clarity.

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	35
BIRTHPLACE	Chongqing, China
CURRENT POSITION	Staff Writer at *The New Yorker*

How did you develop that reporting approach?

I started by writing shorter pieces online for *The New Yorker*. They were often quick reactions to an unexpected political development or social trend in China. I realized that because all I had ever read were these non-ethnically Chinese writers, I often found myself adopting their voices inadvertently. In these early pieces, I came to conclusions that weren't exactly wrong, but by the end of 1,000 words, part of me would think I failed to capture some subtlety and complexity of the situation.

When I had the great fortune of being assigned longer pieces, and as I tried to untangle my own thought process and inject my personal story and my perspective into these larger historical narratives, I realized that it was important for me to acknowledge where I might differ from previous journalists. And even when I did agree with them, I had to acknowledge to myself how I arrived there, and I really had to think through my experience within the labyrinthine system of Chinese society. Oftentimes, what I wrote as a result felt more muddled, but it also felt truer to my sense of reality. In my longer pieces, you see me groping toward not necessarily a different conclusion than my predecessors, but maybe a conclusion that's infused with greater shades of color and complications along the way.

In that sense, I'm not necessarily either exonerating or forgiving obvious trespasses in Chinese history, but trying to make sense of them. In my writing, I think I've evolved toward a place where I'm not trying to pass judgment, but trying to explain how we got to this

present place in China. I am trying to offer a narrative where you can penetrate the mentality of every single actor on different sides of the ideological divide and feel that you understand them, even if, at the end of the day, you can't agree with them. At the beginning of my career, I was trying to imitate the voices of writers that I admired, but now, I feel like I have discovered my own to capture the complexity of China. That's definitely been a learning process for me.

Are there major misconceptions that you try to counter through your reporting?

I'm not sure that the average American really understands the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Just last month, it was reported that Trump is contemplating a ban on CCP members and their families from ever entering the United States. Immediately on my social media, I saw strangers celebrating this, because they saw the CCP as very black and white. They thought obviously this should have been done a long time ago, because the CCP has been responsible for some of the worst murderous excesses of Chinese history, including famine and the Cultural Revolution. That isn't necessarily wrong, but what that leaves out is just the brutal efficiency and the propagandistic prowess of the CCP and how its greatest engine is its ability to mire all its members, and an entire country, in complicity.

When Americans, even some of my friends, ask: Isn't every CCP member implicitly endorsing dictatorial rule and human rights abuses? I want to say yes *and* no. I myself am the daughter of CCP members. I want to be absolutely clear eyed about the brutal history and present of the CCP, but one has to understand its internal logic, its hold over its people, its tentacular structure, and the mechanism of imposed historical amnesia upon which it builds its authority. Some people ask why the Chinese people don't rise up in democratic revolt. They say it should be a black-and-white decision. If they haven't, they say, it's because they're cowards or they're somehow not built for liberation. But that's a very partial view of China. When the only word that's attached to CCP is "genocidal," and when the only descriptor you have for China is "human rights abuses," you really obscure a larger view of a country and its complexities. A partial truth can distort your view of a place.

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When I'm writing about China, I'm constantly thinking about how, in my limited space on the page, to offer context. My responsibility as a writer is both journalistic and moral. I need to report the facts, but they need to be explained in a context to illuminate larger truths. I make sure that when I make an assertion about China, I delve into the past enough to supply motivations for some of the seemingly utterly absurd and cruel turns in China's history. This is not at all to exonerate the atrocities, but you absolutely have to know what is going on inside the minds of the people who are making those decisions in order to understand why, for example, in 1949, China became a Communist regime rather than following the path of Chiang Kai-Shek. So in my writing, when I hearken back to landmark moments in Chinese history — liberation, the Cultural Revolution, or the period of reform and opening — I explain that event *and* the circumstances that led to that event. And only by contextualizing that event can we better understand how we got from there to now.

How is this journalistic responsibility reflected in the topics you choose to cover? One of my favorite pieces you've written is from a few years ago, when you wrote about the Chinese industry of mistress dispellers, who are people employed by wives to get rid of their husbands' mistresses. How did you arrive at that topic and why did you decide it was important to cover?

That was a fun piece to report. I had been reading on English media a lot of short pieces about this new cottage industry in China. The reporting was always quite sensationalized, and maybe that was what attracted me initially. But at the same time, I remember thinking, if I weren't Chinese and I read this article, it would confirm if not compound my suspicion that China is a bizarre, exotic country that really has nothing in common with my world. And that grated on me as a journalist, because I had a suspicion that as soap opera-esque as the premise seemed, the mistress dispellers were tied to the terrible sexism, patriarchy, and economic inequality that would precipitate the need for an industry like this.

So I dug around, found one of these mistress-dispelling agencies, and I went to Shanghai to report the story. Some of my suspicions were confirmed, but I was able to dig even deeper into divorce laws and how women are stripped of the protections that I assumed human beings would have in the event of a divorce. I learned about the economic incentives to stay in a marriage, even a loveless one, and what it said about the deformed nature of Chinese society and its utter devaluing of women. Through the reporting process, I realized that this was even more entrenched in Chinese culture and codified into Chinese law than I had imagined. So a story that began as this fishing expedition led me to pretty disturbing and significant discoveries about the broken nature of Chinese social structure.

Most devastatingly, when that structure is perpetuated for long enough, women can come to loathe themselves and to support the oppressive system that they live in. Women can almost perpetuate the system in their own way, because they don't see a way out. The only way to survive the system is to navigate it, and that's how you arrive at wives paying absurd sums to have their husbands mistresses exported to different cities, rather than getting a divorce, which in the West is the natural conclusion to a marriage that isn't working out.

Now looking back, I see that there are even more directions I could have gone with that story, but it did lead me down this path of discovery about the place that I come from and made me think about how I come from a lineage of women — of mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers — who did not have the aid of mistress dispelling, but who had to endure the system of abusive and cheating husbands. This is a reality they've had to contend with for a very long time. Mistress-dispelling services are not an odd eccentricity, but actually a totally logical response to a society that offers no other solutions to these embattled women.

Jiayang Fan and her mother at the World Trade Center in 1992, after they moved to America.
Credit: Courtesy of Jiayang Fan

How do you navigate the issue of audience? I assume most of your audience is not within China, so how do you go about covering a country that isn't engaging with your work?

When I'm writing, I try to ignore the idea of audience. I would like to think that I'm writing for myself and that the narrative has to make sense to me, both the Chinese person in me and the American in me. But obviously, in an article, I have to explain much more context about China than domestic reporters. That's when I lean on the American in me to gauge what I have to explain. I am also very conscious of not being patronizing to the Chinese person in me. I still remember all my own suspicions of Americans when I was growing up, and my doubts about the assumptions that Americans might have about the Chinese. So, to do justice to the Chinese in me, I need to describe the subtleties and complexities of the Chinese psychology and why it's utterly logical for Chinese people to make decisions that an American audience might find to be counterintuitive.

Now, in the age of social media, many conservatives and Trump supporters read my byline, which is not an American name, and openly question if I am a mole and agent for Communist China. That amuses me, and I can pretty much ignore it. But most of the criticism actually comes from Chinese readers, both in China and here in the United States. That's natural because they want to know how their country is seen in the pages of a Western publication. Some take me to task because they think that I am writing to support an American agenda and to further American political ambitions. That comes from some fundamental misunderstanding of what journalistic independence in the U.S. means. Many of them wonder if I am brainwashed, and there is a sense that I have been bleached of my Chinese values and that I am trying to please my American superiors. In a way, that's more revealing of the Chinese psychology than it is a description of me. Because in those criticisms, I see that they think it is not possible for me to express my individual values. They believe that whatever is expressed on the page has to be at the behest of a larger political agenda.

But it doesn't mean that their criticisms don't cause me to reflect on any unconscious biases that I might have. And this means I become almost obsessive as I'm reading and editing my work, so that I am as comprehensive as possible in representing different views on particular subjects without losing coherence in the narrative. As hard as I try to write for myself, I have absorbed such a wide spectrum of American and Chinese readers that I become a little bit paranoid in my own evaluation of my work. But, at the end of the day, I'm writing the story from the perspective of Jiayang Fan, and because it is impossible to talk to every single person, I have to make certain executive decisions about the array of perspectives, and I have to trust my journalistic compass.

This is a long rambling way of saying that I am quite aware of the broad spectrum of my readership, and that I want to absorb their viewpoints in order to make me sensitive to my own unconscious biases. Ultimately, I want to produce something that is measured and considered, but still has the integrity and signature of the byline, which is Jiayang Fan.

How do you process that online trolling? Do you read all of it or do you try to ignore it?

Toward the beginning of my journalism career, when I had a smaller social media presence, I did read quite a bit of it. But now as the U.S.-China relationship continues to evolve, the number of trolls have grown past my ability to read all of their missives. Some of it is so toxic that even though I realize that this is a faceless stranger who is possibly mentally unhinged, writing from an unknown location, it still manages to to affect me. So, I try to read less of that. But as a writer, I can't be oblivious to the growing quantity of venom directed against me. It's my responsibility to be observant of the world around me, and the amount of verbal harassment I receive is somewhat indicative of this changing Sino-American relationship and this climate of hostility.

I don't read every single one of the messages, but what I can take away is the emotional intensity, though that may seem strange to say. Sometimes it feels like they are scraping from some very intimate place in their heart, and even though there might not be a rational basis for their rage, it is revealing about the jingoistic propaganda that they have received. Most of all, it speaks to the astounding power of mass propaganda to pierce the hearts of possibly otherwise apolitical individuals.

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK RECOMMENDATION	*A Tale of Love and Darkness* by Amos Oz
FAVORITE LISTENING	History podcasts
FAVORITE FILM	*The Lives of Others*
MOST ADMIRE	Aristotle

A lot of online trolls are dismissed as shills of the CCP, but many of the messages I receive are from Chinese millennials who seem quite highly educated and don't seem to be affiliated directly with the CCP or paid by the party. Their fierce need to defend their country and to be patriotic is so revealing of the way that the party has so successfully conflated the CCP with Chinese heritage and with Chinese identity.

Sometimes I think what they are defending is not necessarily the political policy initiatives of the CCP, because a lot of these people don't have a real understanding of what's happening in Xinjiang or Tibet. But I think what they're fighting for is a sense of themselves. And that's really important. When I say that they're writing to me and scraping out from some dark inner wall of their hearts, that's what I mean. Their venom is almost darkly tender. I feel like these people are fighting to assert a sense of themselves because they feel like they're obliterated by Western shills like me and their existence is in jeopardy. To me, that seems like a complete reversal of reality. But, as a journalist, I have to acknowledge the utter earnestness of their vitriol, and that it comes from a place of real sincerity that speaks to the power of this regime. The CCP really immerses its citizens in the psyche of Chinese nationalism. That's what makes it so powerful and seemingly impossible to topple.

Has your experience reporting in China changed over previous years as the restrictions on journalists have begun to tighten?

It has changed considerably. Xi Jinping's policies have become increasingly repressive and the chill, which is really just omni-directional fear, is felt in wholly apolitical sectors. I'm not a political reporter, though while reporting on China I obviously touch on politics, and at the beginning of my career, cultural and social pieces seemed fully reportable in China. Increasingly, especially over the course of the last three to four years, sources have shrunk away. Their anxiety and increasing sense of being compromised by any affiliation with a Western journalist is very palpable. That makes it almost impossible for a journalist, even someone who presents as Chinese, to have an honest conversation with them — doors are slammed in your face before you have a chance to introduce yourself. And now, given the downward spiral of the U.S.-China relationship, I feel increasingly doubtful that I will be able to even enter China, perhaps in the short term.

Witnessing the expulsions of Western reporters only makes my heart heavier. As someone of Chinese heritage, I feel particularly imperiled. My immediate family is here in the U.S., but I still very much worry about what consequences my reporting will have on my extended family, many of whom are ardent Party members. It makes me feel sad about the future of foreign correspondents in China, because as much as reporting on China has been facilitated by the internet and by the ability to consider the country from afar, being there is the truest way of understanding what is going on. Especially in an environment that's increasingly timorous, where people are reluctant to talk, trying to establish a relationship of trust from the other side of the world is going to be difficult.

I worry for the future. I worry for my own ability to report stories that live up to my standard of what a China story should be, and I worry for the American understanding of China if journalists are not able to produce stories that fully humanize the Chinese. That is only possible when you are able to have a meal with them and gain their trust over time through

face-to-face interactions.

So you have no plans of doing any reporting trips to China in the near future?

Never say never, but I would have to think very carefully. I don't want to imperil the people around me. I don't want to imperil my sources. I have to act responsibly, and that means making sure that I have a good sense of what to expect before I travel.

And how about your reactions to what is happening in Hong Kong, which you have done a lot of reporting about in recent years?

I feel like my personal history is this awkward reflection of Hong Kong's transformation, as someone who was born a mainlander, then raised in America and came to expect the freedoms of a liberal society. Pulling back, I wondered, who am I? As an individual, that is much easier to reconcile. For Hong Kong, it is not so easy.

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To the CCP, Hong Kong is a problem to be solved. That is very clear. China absolutely will not brook any dissent because it expects to rule Hong Kong with the same kind of authority that it rules mainland China. But for the Western world, Hong Kong is a symbol to be defended. It augurs very badly for the West if Hong Kong falls, because it speaks to the rising strength of China. And then, for the Hong Kong people, I feel tremendous sympathy for how beleaguered they are as the hapless pawns that have been acted upon over time by greater powers.

That sense of powerlessness is something that I feel tremendous empathy towards, because in effect, that is me. I did not choose to be born Chinese. I did not choose to move to the U.S. I did not choose the education that I received. But I've grown into this person. And how do I own my identity? In my reporting, I ask myself: how do I own the story that I did not necessarily choose? And how does the act of writing it empower me? That's what Hong Kong is trying to do. My article from last year about Hong Kong was badly received by the mainland press. What one can read from that is that China is utterly intolerant of anyone who says that Hong Kong does not absolutely need to bend to China's authority.

I don't feel the obligation to take a side. To me, Hong Kong is not this abstract symbol to be defended, but it feels like a reflection of my own path, and I feel keenly Hong Kong's powerlessness in the face of trying to claim their own past and present. For me, that is possible, but unfortunately it does not seem possible for that beleaguered city. I feel a tremendous sense of hopelessness for the city.

Given the trajectory of things, with the new security law, I don't know what real tools it has in its arsenal. Of course, Trump has passed sanctions, but the U.S. is mired in turbulence of its own domestic politics. The world is distracted by the pandemic. Hong Kong, at this point, is more compromised than it's ever been. And self-empowerment does not seem feasible. As someone who's only ever wanted self empowerment, and who has built a career on trying to reconcile the unpredictable turns of my own story, I feel deeply for this city that does not have the same ability to do that for itself.

Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protest, July 7, 2019.
Credit: Studio Incendo, Creative Commons

What is the hardest story you've worked on?

It's a good question. There was a story that I wrote a couple of years ago about producing wine in Ningxia. I went to Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia, which I had never been to. It is one of the poorest provinces, ignored both by China and by the world. Arriving there, I felt very much like a tourist, which I don't feel in most parts of China. But I was very exhilarated and excited to be there. And the piece from the outset seemed like it could just be a fluff piece. It was about the wine country and about China's newfound taste for the luxury of wine. I was only there for four days. First, I visited vineyards and mock chateaus that were tourist attractions for domestic visitors, but then I went to the outskirts of the city and visited the dwellings of these Muslim minorities.

I was so struck by how in every different story that I have reported, China doesn't seem to be one country once you crack it open. You have the middle-class affluent tourists, you have the people that are trying to cater to them, you have these Western enterprises coming to get in on the market. But then you have century-old fissures in history that create ethnic strife in a country. When I would go to these markets on the outskirts of Ningxia and talk to a lot of these elders guarding their temples, they would talk about being increasingly kicked off their land and really feeling like they were nomads.

What was so hard about that story was that I was sent to report this story about wine and the growing Chinese middle class, which is a worthy story in its own right. But in the process, I saw at the edges all the economic sacrifice and suffering of people who are not even part of that story. And I saw how these people are inextricably linked to the engine that's fueling the middle class and how little space I had on the page to really do full justice to what they have experienced.

And on top of that, for the story, I talked to the highest-level official I've ever talked to in China. He was a retired official in Ningxia who worked in the government for decades. He was extremely well spoken, intelligent, and shrewd about the country's progress, its need for change, transformation and liberalization. He upended my sense of all CCP apparatchiks as robotic 'yes men.' It occurred to me that to be working at the highest levels of the CCP, you have to be able to navigate this pretty insidious system. The people at the top are very intelligent, worldly and sophisticated. But that, at some level, you have to be deliberately muddled in your thinking. Even as you believe in reform and liberalization, you cannot impugn the system that has supported you and has given rise to who you are.

That interview was illuminating, but also quite difficult for me to sit through because I saw why change would be next to impossible in China. That interview disabused my assumption that this system is run by automatons, but it made me realize that's exactly why it's so hard to topple — because it requires incredibly brilliant people to practice the "double think" that Orwell speaks of.

Going back to my article, and the project of trying to capture this growing industry in Ningxia, I felt so helpless when trying to fully give an expansive view of what's behind what we think of as progress in China. It made me consider who is being left behind, how do they conceive of their lives, and how China rising as a worthy rival to the U.S. is built on the erasure of populations that, if not for the wine story, I might not have ever been able to explore.

So, reporting that story wasn't hard, but it made me reflect on the responsibility I have as a reporter, to both investigate the dominant narratives that we are aware of and tug at the threads of stories that have not yet come out, and to really tie them together in a coherent way. The sexy stories about China's growth is the other side of the coin from the story of the Muslim population in Ningxia. It's nowhere near on par with what is going on in the camps in Xinjiang, but it is a minor echo of what's going on in Xinjiang, and that's almost why I felt like it needed to be told. The repression in Ningxia has been more indirect, but much more successful. And unpacking how the CCP is able to tame that population gives us some understanding of what the CCP is trying to do in much more outrageous ways in Xinjiang, which is one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world.

So, that story was hard because I realized the immensity of my responsibility, and how much it was up to me to illuminate this world that has been obscured for so many reasons for so long.

Katrina Northrop is a journalist based in New York. Her work has been published in *The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Providence Journal,* and *SupChina.* @NorthropKatrina

COVER STORY

Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMANN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

THE BIG PICTURE

Transsion's Triumph

BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

A look at Transsion's monumental growth, unique marketing strategies and future growth potential.

Q & A

Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEAPLE

The EU Chamber of Commerce in China president talks about China's self-inflicted problems; how he gets away with being so outspoken; and why he believes in China's comeback gene.

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