

Q & A

Te-Ping Chen on Imagining China's Future

The fiction writer and journalist talks about the inspiration for her new collection of short stories.

BY KATRINA NORTHROP — FEBRUARY 14, 2021

Te-Ping Chen is a fiction writer and journalist, who was a longtime Wall Street Journal correspondent in Beijing and Hong Kong, and now reports for the Journal from Philadelphia. Her debut short story collection, [Land of Big Numbers](#), was released this month. These stories trace a diverse set of characters in China, from a rural inventor desperately trying to build an airplane to impress local Party cadres, to a dissident daughter posting the government's human rights abuses online, to a young migrant working in a flower shop and becoming enamored with her wealthy customers. In this lightly edited interview, we discussed the inspiration behind these stories, how reporting on China is different from writing fiction set in China, and how reality in China is often more whimsical than what a fiction writer could dream up.



Te-Ping Chen.

Illustration by Kate Copeland

Q: How did you decide to write this book?

A: Well, it wasn't that I set out to write a book. When I began writing these short stories, they were almost just like a writing exercise that I had set up for myself. I grew up writing poetry and fiction, and I had written a novel when I was living in Chengdu some years before I started work as a reporter. When I started at the *Journal*, I set aside the novel for a number of years. When I picked it back up, I was just really struggling. I had lost that spark. But one evening, when I was biking home from the Beijing bureau, this phrase 'Shanghai Murmur' popped into my head. I had been brainstorming alternate titles for the novel, hoping that it might trigger something in me, but 'Shanghai Murmur' didn't quite fit. So, I decided that I would write a short story around it. And then I decided to try writing 10 of them to give myself a break from the novel. It turned out to be such a relief.

The novel that I had been working on was a piece of historical fiction. So I was sitting around, trying to figure out these really granular details — like, what kind of car was prevalent in 1930s Shanghai. When I started writing short stories, though, I could just write what I was seeing around me in a place that is currently making history. They came so readily then.

You were a reporter covering China for the *Journal* for many years. How does writing fiction set in China differ from reporting on China?

When you are reporting an article, it's such a linear process in many ways. You have a

question, and you are just organizing yourself around that. You are drawing these concentric circles, talking to everyone you can think of around this very particular idea or question, and at the end, you sit down and knit it all together. There is a lot of creativity, and I have always loved that process. But by contrast, with fiction, you can draw on anything from the world around you: what you're reading, history, books, music, conversations that you've had over the years, confidences that people have made in you. You just have so much more material that you can access and play with.

For me, it really felt liberating to get to experiment and play. I had all these notebooks filled with details and imagery and overheard conversations that I had been keeping since I first arrived in China in 2006 as a student. There was a feeling of excitement that I could now build a scaffolding for them and try to give them life in some way. I think about the character Cao Cao in the story called 'Flying Machine', which is about a rural inventor. He has all these old rusted bits that he's collected over the years — what other people might consider trash. And I feel like, in some ways, I had assembled this warehouse of all these bits and pieces and scraps from my years living in China. I felt the urge to lay it all out and try and create meaning out of it.

One of the things that really struck me in this collection was your use of magical realism. For example, in 'New Fruit,' you tell the story of a fruit that first makes everyone extremely happy, and then intensely sad. How did you decide that this magical quality was right for a book about China?

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	35
BIRTHPLACE	Berkeley, Calif., USA
CURRENT POSITION	Reporter at the <i>Wall Street Journal</i>

In China, you often hear that reality is so much more outrageous and extraordinary than anything that a fiction writer could possibly dream of. And that's so true. It's a country where the government literally can control the weather and decide when it's going to rain. When I was living in Beijing, there was a period of time when the trend was for people to wear these fake green plants on their hair, like sprouts. There were times walking down the street, if you were in a really crowded, narrow alley, you could almost trick yourself into thinking that you were walking through a moving green field. I loved so many of those details from life in China that were just so surprising. And so, yes, magical realism absolutely felt like a way of evoking that sort of more playful, surprising side of life in the country, which I think can be hard to access.

Your first story, 'Lulu', is about two siblings who take two very divergent paths. Lulu becomes a dissident, and is ultimately jailed for posting about human rights abuses online, while her brother becomes a chef and video game champion. What inspired that story?

A lot of the stories in the book riff off of an image or an idea. But with 'Lulu,' that was one story where I actually did have a very deliberate experience I wanted to explore, which was what it's like to see someone that you love do what the sister does in that story, namely try to make yourself heard politically in a system that doesn't allow for that. Of course, like any other foreign correspondent in Beijing, I had written my fair share of stories about dissidents and human rights lawyers and people who end up getting sanctioned by the state. When you talk with their family members, there is admiration for what their loved ones had done, but at the same time, there is an incredibly conflicted set of emotions that must also entail frustration and anger and fear — and a sense of helplessness. Like, why are you doing this in a system when you know that you're going to be punished? So that was the starting point of the story.

As I was writing, I was also thinking a lot about how cruelty and injustice coexist in so many

countries — including the United States — right alongside regular life. It is possible for ordinary citizens or visitors to really never see the uglier sides of society. When I was thinking about how to evoke that for readers, a pair of twins seemed like the strongest way to create that contrast.

I was struck by how the brother, who as a young boy wasn't a good student and spent all day playing video games, ended up being more traditionally successful and providing support for his parents. While Lulu, who attended a prestigious college, went down a politically active path and ended up going to jail. What does the story say about achieving success in Chinese society?

I think success binds you in certain ways in China; it circumscribes your actions and what you can say. We can see that clearly with high-profile people like celebrities or entrepreneurs. To be ambitious in any society can often require that you have a narrower field of vision — to look away from other things that are happening in society and not accept the feeling of responsibility that others, like Lulu, do. But for a certain kind of person that is hard to do. In the case of Lulu, she says that there are things happening around her that are intolerable and that she's going to raise her voice in whatever small way she can. Lulu, constitutionally, cannot look away.

When I was writing this, I was absolutely thinking about people that I had met in Chinese society. Some of them would be really vocal on issues, and I would think, 'My God, be careful!' You feel that very human sense of compassion and fear on their behalf. In some cases, their campaigns were perhaps occasioned by their own life circumstances, something that had happened to them or their family. But in other cases, I was struck by people who just seem to feel, on a really instinctive level, that there is something in them that just can't be silent.

“ **To be ambitious in any society can often require that you have a narrower field of vision — to look away from other things that are happening in society and not accept the feeling of responsibility.** ”

I was also interested in the role of the internet in that story. For the brother, the web allowed him to be a successful videogamer, but for Lulu, it led her to go to jail. Did you think about the internet as a key driving force in this story?

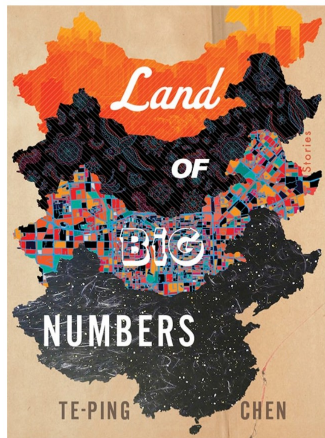
The experience of being online is one where you can feel this rush of power. Lulu absolutely experiences that, because she's speaking to an audience, and what she's posting is getting a response. And likewise, with the brother, he also acquires a sense of power that comes with these competitions and developing his own skills in this arena. But for both of them, there is a degree of hollowness. When her father asks, 'Do you think what you've done is correct? Does it have any meaning?' — these are questions that, when it comes to the internet, we're all asking ourselves. We live so much of our lives online, and to what extent is there meaning there? To what extent do these things translate into actual meaning in the real world? In the case of the brother, the internet becomes a source of so much recognition and professional success, but in the case of his sister, it is the reverse. When we think about the internet, there's so much possibility, but it is also a place of a lot of dangers.

Class issues in China are also common themes in the book. For example, in 'Shanghai Murmur,' the young migrant worker in a flower shop becomes obsessed with a wealthy customer and his fancy pen. How did you approach that theme, and why do you think it is an important theme in Chinese society today?

With 'Shanghai Murmur,' it was a character who in some ways was really accessible. I was writing about a young woman and evoking an experience of longing and this feeling that her

sense of herself doesn't match your actual life circumstances. She questions whether she'll actually achieve what she wants, and she's projecting all this longing onto her customer. So the fact that she was a migrant worker, and from the bottom of society, was very much an outgrowth of those specific feelings that she was dealing with.

But in this book, there are a number of people like her, who grew up in difficult economic circumstances or who come from more humble backgrounds. I'm thinking about Cao Cao, the elderly farmer wants to build his own airplane and flying machine, or the young government bureaucrat who gets swept up in the stock market in 'Land of Big Numbers.' That feeling of striving and wanting to better yourself is one that is such a recurrent motif in China. I don't know how you could write about China without going there.



Chen's debut fiction collection was released this month.

Your last story, 'Gubeikou Spirit,' is an amazing tale about a group of commuters who get stuck in a train station for months. Because they are stuck for so long and, ironically, are so comfortable, only the protagonist and a few teenagers want to leave when the train eventually comes. What were you hoping to say with that ending, where most people want to stay in the station?

At the end of the day, it's about the path of least resistance. They're living so comfortably; they've acquired all these accoutrements of privileged life in some ways. They are being fêted by state media, they pride themselves on being these heroes. Of course, it's an absurd situation. But when I was writing, I empathized with those characters. Like, come on, we've got ramen, we've got TV, we've got home cooked deliveries. There's a sense of empathy for the people who want to stay. They'd all essentially agreed amongst themselves to

embrace this narrative that had been created for them by state media and that was so powerful. When, ultimately, the main character decides that she wants to buck the system and get out of there, she's joined by so few people. I think that's reality in some ways: It's easier to be passive, and especially if you feel like you're in a safe, comfortable, privileged position. Why would you risk that? Getting on the train is a risk. The outside world is, at this point, a little bit foreign to them. And as they discussed, it's a world full of more economic depression and crime. They're safe underground. When the train finally arrives, its appearance barely ruffles them.

In the story, the police tell them that the reason they can't get out of the station is because they need to exit from a different station than the one they entered. That detail is just so amazing because it is so bureaucratic.

I had so much fun writing little bits of gentle satirization of state media. When I was in Beijing, I wrote more stories about public transportation than probably most, because I always found it so fascinating. It's just such a microcosm of society in many ways. And it's such a symbol for Beijing. But what would happen if a super modern symbol of such pride started to break down? I remember coming from a press conference back to the bureau on the subway, and just looking around and having that thought: What if we just got trapped? What would happen and what kind of alliances would spring up? Who would be my friends? How would we survive this? Those themes are resonant in China, as are questions, more broadly, of what it means to be comfortable, even in a situation that is objectively wrong.

On a side note, [one of the stories](#) I really enjoyed working on when I was in Beijing was about a competition that the Beijing subway system had over who could be the most 'civilized' subway passenger. It was called a 'Be Splendid' contest. It was just this really

glorious, delightful, ridiculous contest that the city had put on, with prizes and everything. So when I wrote this, I was absolutely thinking of some of those scenes that I had encountered as a reporter. It was like China's Next Top Model, except for transportation.

You recently wrote a *Journal* [article](#) about the connection between the Chinese government and Chinese culture. Could you explain what drove you to write that piece and your perspective on the co-option of Chinese culture by the government?

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK REC	Invisible Planets , written and translated by Ken Liu
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i>
PERSONAL HEROES	Zadie Smith, Benjamin Franklin, Elie Wiesel

It's a question I've been thinking about for a really long time and haven't known how to tackle it. But what brought it most immediately to the forefront was having a son and thinking about how to navigate Chinese culture as a parent, especially now that China is so different from what it was when I was growing up. Being ethnically Chinese, that identity really was the building block of my own childhood. So I was trying to think about what lexicon we will be using in raising our son. How do we talk about the country? How do we do so in a way that feels true to what we love about it, but also is mindful about current political realities? For anyone living in the Chinese diaspora, these questions come up, especially in a more politicized time when China has been much more aggressive on the world stage. There are parts of that identity that have been so much more scrutinized. And so it felt important for me, just personally, to try and think about this question and make sense of it, and how to approach it in some ways in my own head, and translate that into how I am going to raise my son.

Did you develop a way to approach this issue while writing the piece?

One of the people I interviewed for the piece, a professor who immigrated from China many years ago and has had children here in the U.S., said he tells his children basically that the Chinese government is not the Chinese people. You can take pride in one and not the other. I don't think there are any easy answers to these sorts of questions. But that is such an important distinction to draw. Not just for people like myself, of course, who think about these issues more from an identity point of view, but just more broadly, especially in a moment when China is so much in the headlines and people tend to think of the country as a monolith and sometimes use these really crude brushstrokes. But as we know, the experience and the identities it contains are just incredibly diverse and complex. And that's really what I hope *Land of Big Numbers* can evoke for readers. It's easy to flick past a headline and to feel like you have a glancing acquaintance with the statistics and that you know a place. But I truly believe that to understand China, you do have to have a deeper view of its people and the complexities therein.

You also wrote a [piece](#) for the *Journal* a few years ago about your own family's fascinating history in China, could you explain the process of writing that piece, and why you wanted to explore it?

When I was in the process of writing this book, just before I left Beijing, I discovered a forgotten chapter of my own family's history: My great grandfather had been a poet and an English language journalist in Beijing almost exactly 100 years before I moved to the city to do the same thing. He was a founding member of a party that had a very different vision for a democratic China, one that he believed could be made real. I think about him with regard to the question about what it means to be Chinese. Because it's not one thing. It can encompass so many identities and different visions and aspirations. When we think about Chinese history, it's important to me to focus on individual stories, because those individual stories contain a multitude of possibilities for China's future. It's really easy to think that

history is linear. But China's history is not. It is full of surprises, and that's something that I try to remember.



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 FREYMAN

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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