

PROFILE

Chinese-American author a woman of many perspectives

Celeste Ng talks about her latest novel and names a few of her favourite Asian writers

Alison Singh Gee
life@scmp.com

Celeste Ng stunned international audiences with her 2014 debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You*. The story is about a teenaged Chinese-American girl who is found dead in a lake, plunging her aspirational immigrant family into despair and chaos. It soared up *The New York Times* bestseller list and won an Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature.

Ng now returns with her second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, about a white family based in Cleveland, Ohio that attempts to adopt a Chinese-American baby. The author set the story in her own hometown, Shaker Heights, a progressive planned community.

In an interview with the *Post*, Ng talks about the "Great Chinese-American Novel", the possibility of writing a book set in Hong Kong, and breaking rules.



I don't believe there is such a thing as 'the' Great Chinese-American Novel

CELESTE NG

Your debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, was written from the perspective of a member of a Chinese-American family. In this second novel, you write from the point of view of members of a Caucasian American family. What was different about the process?

There's a saying in writing: the writer's job is to make the unfamiliar feel familiar, and the familiar feel unfamiliar. In the case of *Everything I Never Told You*, my goal was to make the experiences of a family that always felt marginalised feel accessible and understandable even to people who had never been in that situation.

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, I wanted readers – both white and non-white – to understand the Richardson family, even though they could hopefully see a slightly wider perspective than the Richardsons could. But the basic process in both cases was the same, as it is in everything I write: I have to try to get inside each character's head, to get to know each character as I would get to know a person in real life, so that I can guess what they would do in a given situation and understand their motivations and outlook on life.

You set *Little Fires Everywhere* in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a progressive and planned community and also your hometown. What is meaningful and metaphorical about that

choice? Was it daunting to write about your hometown in such an intimate way? How did you go about researching the town as it is today?

I started writing this novel about 10 years after I'd moved away from my hometown – that is, when I first started to get a clearer perspective on both the good things and the not so good things about the place. There's a great joy in writing about a place you know very well, but also a lot of responsibility in trying to be accurate.

I drew on memory for many of the details – the story takes place in the late 1990s, when I lived there – and the town's local history librarian was invaluable in helping me check the details. This is a portrait of the town as it was in that era, not as it is today, so I wanted to get those details right.

What are your favourite books written by authors of Chinese or Asian descent and why? Do these books have any threads in common that might have woven their way into your own work?

I'm grateful to many of the greats like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Jade Snow Wong and Bette Bao Lord for paving the way for other Chinese writers like me, and am glad to see their trail has allowed many other writers to tell their own, often very different, stories.

Some books by authors of Chinese descent that I've loved include Laurence Yep's children's books – some of the first I ever saw featuring Chinese children – Peter Ho Davies' work, including his most recent novel, *The Fortunes*, and Gish Jen's work. For writers of other Asian descent, Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* are both breathtaking, as are V.V. Ganeshananthan's *Love Marriage*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

All of the books that I've mentioned are written from a particular perspective informed by the writer's Asian background, yet also tell a universal story along with the particular. That is something I always aim to do in my own work.

What do you think it would mean to write the "Great Chinese-American Novel". Would that challenge as an author interest you? What are your own aspirations as a writer?

I don't believe there is such a thing as "the" Great Chinese-American Novel, because the Chinese American experience is so varied.

There are – and ought to be – many Great Chinese-American Novels out there, just as there ought to be many Great American Novels.

Which Asian country are you most familiar with and what are your impressions of that country and its people? Would it interest you to set a story in an Asian country? If so, which country would it be and why?

My family comes from Hong Kong, so insofar as I identify with Asian countries, that's the area I feel the most kinship to and the most pull towards.

I don't feel that I know it well enough to set a story there, though. The country I know best is the United States, but we'll see. Maybe another story will take me to Hong Kong

ART



FRENCH MOSAIC ARTIST ENJOYING YET ANOTHER NIGHT ON THE TILES

On his third visit to the city, the street artist put up 32 new works, but some have been removed

Kylie Knott
kylie.knott@scmp.com

French urban artist Invader has left more of his distinctive mosaic fingerprints around Hong Kong, on his third "invasion" of the city.

But some pieces have already been removed – one in Causeway Bay and one in Tsim Sha Tsui, where a few tiles had been left behind. (He has been asked to comment on the removals.)

The artist, who keeps his

identity a secret, often wearing a mask when creating his works, left 32 new pieces across the city in September, his works modelled on the crude pixelation of 1970s and '80s video games such as *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* (he took his name from the 1978 arcade game).

His works can be found in highly visible locations and have been placed in 33 countries and more than 65 cities, from Melbourne to Mombasa.

Recent works in Hong Kong

include marine motifs (a mermaid and an anchor) as well as common emojis. In Wan Chai he left a cheeky message comprising a *Pac-Man* motif followed by the words "was here".

With some basic instructions as to where some of his new works have been placed, a *Post* team set out in search of his pieces – traipsing from Mid-Levels to Wan Chai and Tsim Sha Tsui to Kowloon City. Some are small – just a few centimetres wide – while others take up entire walls.

Walking past one of his works in Central, Hongkonger Vincent Chan says that while he is not familiar with the artist, he recognised the *Space Invaders* motif.

"I spent many nights and many hours playing *Space Invaders*," says Chan. "Lots of happy memories."

Student Kenneth Lai says he did not notice the Invader artwork as he crossed a road in Kowloon City but is familiar with *Pac-Man*. Lai says he is a fan of street art as long as the artists abide by the law.

"I like street art because it can represent the characteristics of the artist, and represent the culture of a city. But I think it should be done in a legal way."

Looking at the large *Pac-Man* characters on a wall in Tsim Sha Tsui, Indian-born, Hong Kong-based Kinzal Khandelwal says she remembers the game from her childhood. While passers-by were not familiar with the artist, most agreed the works made them happy. "We feel better, you know, when we see the colours... we feel better after seeing all of this," Khandelwal says.

In 2014, internet users were enraged when a depiction of Hong Kong Phooey, a kung fu dog from a '70s American cartoon series of the same name, was removed from a wall in Happy Valley by the Highways Department. The work was originally created as a tribute to Bruce Lee.

Alias HK_58, a version of the Phooey work, sold for US\$250,000 at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2015.

In response to the removal of his works, Invader wrote: "Having invaded more than 60 cities around the world, I have never

faced a situation where a public authority would systematically and rapidly remove art from the streets and I hope it won't happen in Hong Kong either, and that those removals are just an illustration of the rule [that] 10 per cent of my creations are usually destroyed quickly.... I am, of course, very saddened and affected by these removals."

In September, police in Paris arrested two men who allegedly posed as municipal workers and stripped city walls of mosaic works by the artist.

Those wanting to see more of his works can visit the Over the

He likes Hong Kong, he likes to invade Hong Kong, he sees Hong Kong as a unique place

PIOTR SWIES, OVER THE INFLUENCE GALLERY

Influence gallery in Central. "He likes Hong Kong, he likes to invade Hong Kong, he sees Hong Kong as a unique place," says Over the Influence gallery representative Piotr Swies.

The show celebrates the release of the 7th Invasion Guide, titled the "New Mosaics of Ravenna", which focused on his invasion of the Italian city.

"New Mosaics of Ravenna", Over the Influence, 1/F, 159 Hollywood Rd, Central, tel: 2617 9829. Ends Thurs



Invader's distinctive artwork in Central (top) and (above) Piotr Swies, of Over the Influence gallery, with more examples of the French urban artist's mosaics. Photos: David Wong, K.Y. Cheng

HITS & MYTHS

Want your flu shot to be more effective? Just put on a happy face

Sasha Gonzales
life@scmp.com

Can being in a good mood boost the effectiveness of your flu shot?

The short answer: Yes
The facts: As Hong Kong gears up for the dreaded flu season, you might be considering getting the flu vaccine. It is not such a bad idea if you want to protect yourself from the virus.

Dr Tony Wong, a general practitioner at The London Medical Clinic in Central, says the flu vaccine works by injecting small amounts of inactivated viral particles into the body, stimulating the immune system to produce antibodies. These antibodies persist, allowing the body to fight the influenza virus if it comes into contact with it in the future.



A good mood might lower your cortisol levels, seemingly boosting your immune system

DR TONY WONG

"Most yearly flu vaccines protect against two strains of influenza A and two strains of influenza B," Wong says. "The vaccine is available from the time of its release, around September or October, until June the following year. The sooner you're immunised the sooner you'll be protected, but you should delay getting the flu vaccine if you are feeling unwell and have a fever."

Although anyone can get the flu vaccine, Wong recommends certain groups, in particular, should be immunised: children aged between six months and five years, pregnant women, people over 65 years old, people with chronic conditions such as diabetes and asthma, high-risk groups such as health care professionals and teachers, and frequent fliers. You should not get the flu vaccine if you have a severe egg allergy or

worked – with good mood associated with higher levels of antibodies.

Professor Kavita Vedhara, from the university's division of primary care and one of the study's authors, believes a person's mood can affect or influence their immune system in two ways. "In general, people who are more positive may have healthier lifestyles, which could lead to a more robust immune system," she says. "Second, we know that being in a good mood releases specific hormones that commu-

nicate with the immune system and so are able to influence how well it works."

Vedhara says the study results suggest that if a person improves their mood on the day they are vaccinated, they could increase the effectiveness of the jab – and the likelihood that the vaccine will protect them from the virus.

Wong's top tip for boosting your immune system is to avoid prolonged stress. "When you are under stress, your body produces a lot of cortisol," he says. "This stress hormone can suppress important cells in the immune system called lymphocytes, [which] attack viruses and bacteria by producing antibodies. The same cells are required to produce antibodies after the flu jab. So a good mood might lower your cortisol levels, seemingly boosting your immune system."

A good mood is associated with higher levels of antibodies. Photo: Alamy



A good mood is associated with higher levels of antibodies. Photo: Alamy