



PODCAST

Ep. 11: Beijing in Short Fiction

China's capital is so full of contradictions that sometimes only fiction can suffice to capture it. The editor of a new short story collection explains how a literary kaleidoscope can be the best lens.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — AUGUST 6, 2024

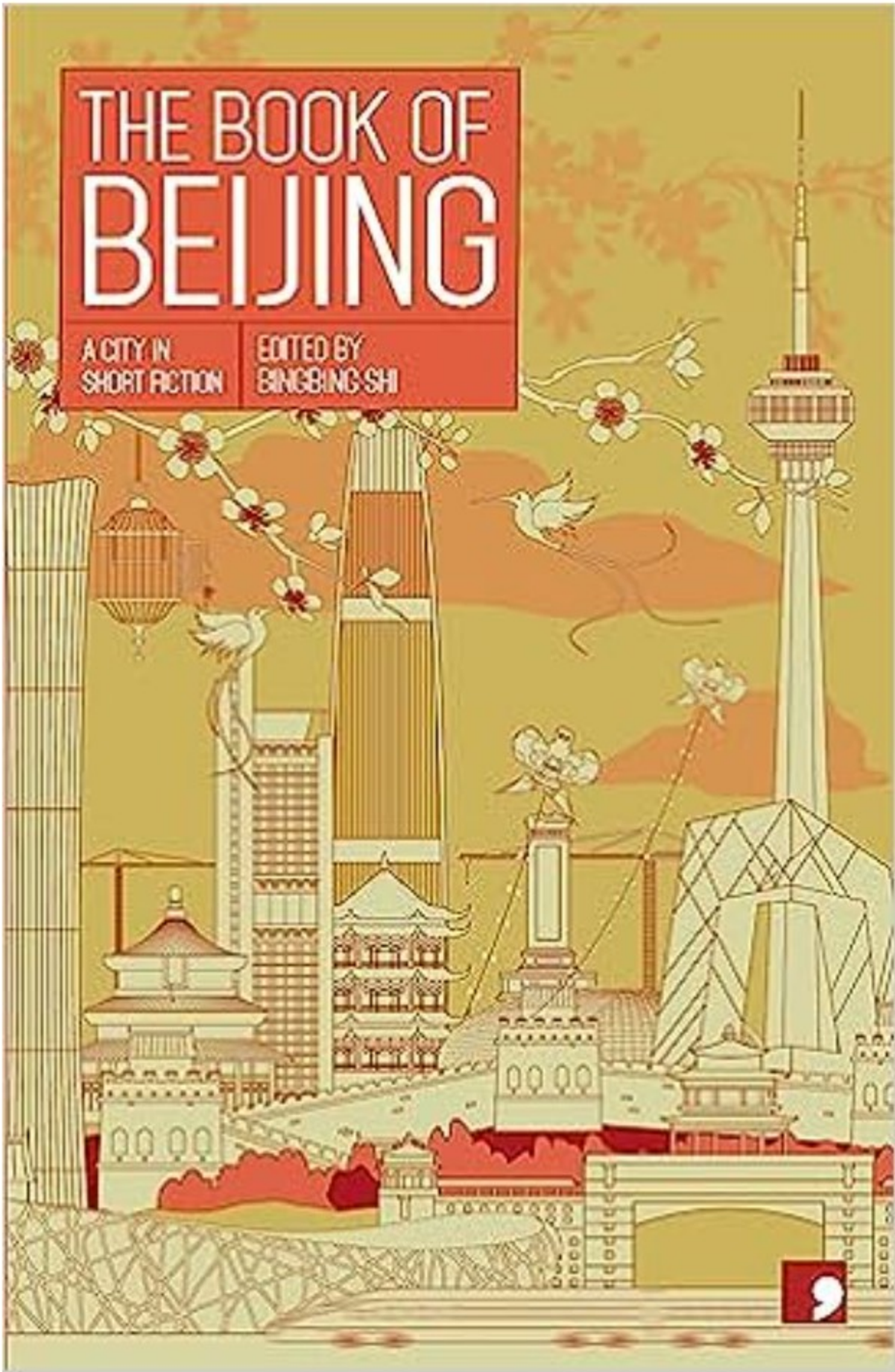
FICTION



This is an episode of the China Books podcast, from China Books Review. Subscribe on your favorite podcast platform, including [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#), where a new episode lands on the first Tuesday of each month. Or listen right here, including to our archive of [past episodes](#).

Beijing is many things to many people: a mecca for migrants and artists; a tech hub; a proving ground for young graduates; a capital of politics and power; a smoggy, traffic-choked dystopia; a charming collection of lakes, leafy parks, narrow lanes and courtyard houses; and an enduring city with 800 years of history and millions of stories to tell.

Ten such stories are told in [The Book of Beijing: A City in Short Fiction](#) (Comma Press, 2023), an anthology in English translation of short stories by Chinese writers, many of whom are award-winning, all of whom either live in Beijing or have an enduring connection to it. The ten stories were all previously published in China — including one in which a young woman wonders what her older boyfriend saw in 1989 in Tiananmen Square. In another, a pre-teen boy, left alone after his older siblings are sent to the countryside, gets caught stealing and fears the consequences. Other stories include speculative fiction from Gu Shi, and a story by Xu Zechen about a counterfeiter who sells fake IDs. The book is part of the acclaimed “A City In Short Fiction” series by Comma Press in the UK, which has also included *The Book of Jakarta*, *The Book of Istanbul* and *The Book of Gaza*. It brings readers into this complex city through intimate, textured and at times jarring tales, of ordinary people navigating extraordinary times.



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In this episode of the China Books podcast, *The Book of Beijing*'s editor, Bingbing Shi, shares her thoughts on Beijing, how she brought the book together, and the impact she hopes it will have on readers outside of China:



Ep. 11: Beijing in Short Fiction

China Books



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Guest



Bingbing Shi earned her PhD from the University of Cambridge’s Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Her research interests include modern and contemporary Chinese literature, translation studies and feminist writing. She has a BA and MA in Chinese literature from Beijing Normal University. Her fiction in Chinese has appeared in *People’s Literature* and *Youth Literature*. She is the editor of [The Book of Beijing](#) (2023).

“

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”

— *Bingbing Shi*

Transcript

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Beijing – a city of dreamers, doers, drifters, grifters, climbers, creators, builders, rulers, enforcers, and entrepreneurs ... a sprawling city of 20 million people – almost half of them not officially there, because the city won’t give them a hukou, the internal passport that would let them get social services. Beijing’s millions of migrants have come in from villages and smaller cities, over decades when China’s economic growth soared and yellow construction cranes dotted the urban skyline, when too many old neighborhoods of narrow lanes and courtyard houses sooty with coal dust tumbled, and new hi-rises and shopping malls rose.

Beijing is also a city of history – of emperors from Mongols to Ming to Manchu, of leafy parks where they worshipped at the Temple of the Sun, the Temple of the Earth, the Temple of the Sky, of warlords and warfare, of protests and revolution, of artists, writers and scholars, of musicians and monks and tech geeks, of change and growth and ambition, and of enduring identity. It’s a city of wide bike lanes, of chatty cab drivers – and of new subway lines that pack in the passengers now. It’s a city that has long had lively street markets and snack stalls – now, tidily sequestered in some of those new buildings. But still, it’s a city of irrepressible spirit, that has outlived everyone who has tried to conquer or tame it. It is a city with stories to tell ... and this episode focuses on a few of them.

(*Music up*)

(01:50): This is the China Books podcast, a companion of the China Books Review. I’m Mary Kay Magistad.

(*Music under*)

And in case you couldn't tell, Beijing is one of my favorite cities in the world. I lived there for 15 years, as a correspondent first for NPR and then for the U.S. public radio program The World. I delighted in the easy comraderie of navigating those bike lanes with Beijingers who had an intuitive sense of flow, of how not to crash into another cyclist, no matter how many were sharing the lane. There's a metaphor there for living in a big city. Now, electric bikes and parked cars have encroached on those lanes – new ways to power yourself in a new era.

And speaking of that era, a new English-language anthology of 10 short stories by Chinese authors captures some of Beijing's spirit, old and new, and it's well worth a read – perhaps on your own commute, perhaps on the beach. It's called *The Book of Beijing: A City in Short Fiction*, by Comma Press in the UK – that's Comma as in, not a semicolon. And it's edited by Bingbing Shi – or Shi Bingbing, in Chinese, family name first. She lived in Beijing for eight years, studying Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University. And now, at age 31, is finishing up a PhD at Cambridge University in the UK, looking at how Chinese literature is adapted for cinema in China. I started out by asking her about her own relationship with Beijing.

(03:22): **BINGBING SHI:** I went to Beijing for my undergraduate study. I studied in Beijing Normal University. I was doing my Bachelor's degree in Chinese literature. And then I did my MPhil degree, Master's degree, also in Chinese literature. So I actually spent seven years in Beijing Normal University. And before I came to Cambridge, I spent eight years in Beijing. So I'm familiar with Beijing. And I like Beijing very much.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: What do you like about it?

BINGBING SHI: When I was an undergraduate, we went to many different places, and we attended lots of cultural activities, like there are lots of museums, exhibitions, spoken dramas. We went to Beijing People's Theater. And the actors are all very famous actors in China. So I think the cultural environment in Beijing is very, very good. University students in Beijing, we feel like we have the whole future, and – yeah.

(04:39): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What years were you there?

BINGBING SHI: Between 2011 and 2019.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Ok. Where did you grow up?

(04:49): **BINGBING SHI:** I grew up in Fujian. It's actually very far from Beijing. I remember, when I was an undergraduate, every holiday I came back home, I needed to take 20 hours by train. And this is the fastest train to my hometown – 20 hours.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Where in Fujian?

BINGBING SHI: Actually, I grew up in a county in Quanzhou. So the town is called Hui An. I think Huian is half a million.

(05:26): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So you went from a smaller city, half a million people – although, in the United States, that's not a small city. Minneapolis is smaller than that. And you went to Beijing, which is more than 20 million people. What struck you about the energy there?

(05:41): **BINGBING SHI:** Traffic. In Beijing, I usually take one hour or more to go to some places in Beijing. And also, in Beijing, people lead very different kinds of life. There are different kinds of people. In my hometown, we all grow up in the same environment. And in my hometown we also speak a dialect called Minnan hua. So people are more similar. But in Beijing, that was my first time to realize that the outside world is so diverse, people from different provinces and have different lifestyles (and) language.

(06:26): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, that's something I loved about Beijing when I lived there, too, that it drew so many different kinds of people. And I lived there both in the second half of the '90s, and then also from 2003 to 2013. So it was this boom time when all kinds of people were coming in from around China, but also from around the world. And the energy and dynamism was just extraordinary to me. But also, as you wrote about really evocatively in the introduction to *The Book of Beijing*, there are these layers of history in Beijing going back 800 years. And you bicycle around in the hutongs, in the courtyard neighborhoods, and you feel it. You stroll around, and even though many of the older sites, the moe ancient sites, are obscured by modern construction, a lot of them are still there. You can still find those layers.

(07:22): **BINGBING SHI:** Yeah, we went to hutongs fairly often. I was cycling to hutongs very often. And I also heard, or witnessed, lots of people's lives in Beijing. Like, at that time, lots of my classmates wanted to stay in Beijing. For lots of people, if they can stay in Beijing, find a job in Beijing, this is proof of their ability. And I think Beijing also gives people opportunities. For example, if you want to do this kind of cultural work – publisher, art, or literature, you have more opportunity to find a job in Beijing.

(08:03): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Than in other cities in China?

BINGBING SHI: I think so, yeah. Because most famous publishers are based in Beijing.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And also, I certainly found when I was there, that it was a time when a lot of artists and filmmakers came to Beijing. And maybe it was partly because of opportunity, because the publishers were there, or the theaters were there or whatever. But it also felt like there was this gravitational pull.

(08:29): **BINGBING SHI:** I think yes, there are lots of artists, writers, in Beijing, because Beijing has universities, has these institutions and 798, this art area, and museums. In Baiziwang, this is where lots of filmmakers who gather together. And there are also art theaters. So I think this kind of institutions and atmosphere, and the people, attract more and more people to come. I actually know some people who like, they want to study literature. And they come to Beijing. And they – even though they are not university students, they just come to my university to audit the class, because their dream is to study literature and to become a writer. When I was an undergraduate, we had a lot of these kind of audit students in our classroom.

(09:24): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** It's cool that those were allowed, that the classroom was open to them. So *The Book of Beijing* is part of a series by Comma Press in Manchester, in the UK. This series brings together anthologies of short stories from different places. So there's *The Book of Istanbul*, *The Book of Jakarta*, *The Book of Gaza*, and so on. What drew you to want to edit *The Book of Beijing*?

(09:59): **BINGBING SHI:** Because I, as I say, I studied Chinese literature for seven years. So, I'm familiar with the history of modern literature, and I also have some context with these writers. And also, now I'm doing my PhD at Cambridge, so I've also received some training in English-speaking scholarship. I think I've learned from different sides, and I feel like I can be a bridge to bring them together.

(10:34): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So you've been doing a PhD at Cambridge. It's actually looking at how Chinese literature is translated into cinema. Have you found in your studies at Cambridge that the approach to literature, or what literature does in society, that there's just sort of a different sensibility than in China? How much is there a difference? How much is there an overlap?

(10:56): **BINGBING SHI:** So actually, I'm based in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. So this is more area studies, instead of the literature department, as I was in Beijing. So I think here at Cambridge, the people I met in daily life are more from different backgrounds, like they are doing anthropology, sociology, or history. But in Beijing, I meet more literature people, and I meet more people who are, like, very passionate, very idealistic about literature. They really want to become writers. They really want to contribute to literature, they want to do this. I would not say people here less care about literature. When I go to the bookstores in Cambridge, or when I go to London, I see so many people reading novels – on the street, in the park. I think this atmosphere is very, very good. The literature, this industry, and publishers, are very prosperous and advanced in the UK. People have the good habit of reading, and they enjoy it. And in China, the people I meet want to pursue literature as a literature scholar or as a writer.

(12:27): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Because?

BINGBING SHI: I'm not very sure (of) the situation now, because now it's more – people meet more difficulties in reality. But at that time, when I was young, there were some people who think literature is very good. People pursue these spiritual things. And also, like, for some young people, they feel like they don't want to work in a company, they don't want to just focus on earning money. So, as I say, they come to Beijing.

(13:03): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And do you think fiction plays an important role these days in China, in terms of provoking thought? I mean, it's both entertainment, but it also serves different purposes.

BINGBING SHI: I think so. I think fiction plays a more and more important role today. Actually, this is also part of my dissertation. My argument is that fiction today is not just books, but fictions are changed into different formats – like TV series, films, video games. Popular cultures in China today become more and more important in our lives. And fiction still provokes a lot of feelings, emotions.

(13:58): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So the stories that are in *The Book of Beijing* originally were published in China, right?

BINGBING SHI: Mm-hmm.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Both as short stories in journals, but also some in social media. And in *The Book of Beijing*, they're translated for a non-Chinese speaking reader, or at least for a reader who speaks English as well as Chinese. And the stories range from a gritty Cultural Revolution-era morality tale, to a kind of a flirtation between old schoolmates who bump into each other years later on a commuter train, to the challenges of buying an apartment in Beijing, to science fiction, including a story in which the Beijing Western Railway Station is a sentient being. Why these stories in particular? What drew you to them? And what did you as curator and editor want to offer a reader who is unfamiliar with Beijing?

(14:51): **BINGBING SHI:** So, when I chose these stories, I want to show the readers in the English-speaking world, a new Beijing, what is happening now. And for these stories, they are something that are very specific

for this city, Beijing, but they are also something that are universal, for the whole world, like the high house price. It's a problem for young people in London or in New York today. So, yeah, this is what I tried to do – a Beijing, a new Beijing, what is happening now, a Beijing that has a long history, but also shares the same concerns, shares similarities, with other metropolitans in the world.

(15:44): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, and the authors range in age from their 30s, I think, to their 60s. Most are award-winning writers, of some combination of novels, short stories, non-fiction, and poetry. Notably, the speculative fiction writer Gu Shi, who I've interviewed, actually, in a different podcast, she's also an urban planner – but she's currently short-listed for a Hugo Award. Some of the authors were born in Beijing. Some came for university, like you did, or work, or some combination of those things. One is from the state-run Xinhua News Agency. So there are both more 'official' writers, or at least people who come from a more official background, and then those who are not connected in that way. As you were working on this anthology, what did you most enjoy about working with the authors, and where did you find challenges?

(16:41): **BINGBING SHI:** I think the enjoyable part for me is very much about reading these short stories. When I find a good short story, I feel very happy. And some authors talked with me sometimes, when the translator had some problems, because I can communicate with authors. So I think I also enjoy this, very much. The challenging part, I think the most difficulty for me at that time is, I'm just a PhD student. I'm not a well-established author. So I also met some people, for example, who don't want me to translate, or don't want me to select their story. This is also challenging. But I think then the publisher, Comma, they are very good. They help me a lot, and they are very considerate for me.

(17:37): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So I found it interesting that the Confucius Institute in Manchester, a Chinese government-funded institute, supported the project. And one of the stories in the book, "Date at the Art Gallery," actually touches on the 1989 Tiananmen protests. It's something that comes up in this relationship, with a young woman who's about to leave for the United States, because she wants to seek a new life, and her older boyfriend – she knows that he was there. She wonders what it was like. Now he's so normal, and his life is kind of staid, and not very exciting. And it's this very interesting generational tension, like "I know there's something that's hidden. There's something that happened that really affected people's lives, but I don't know enough about it. And I want to break off and find my own meaning and excitement in my life." It was a very interesting story, on multiple levels, but that was one of them, is there is a certain amount of censorship in China at the moment. And I'm just kind of wondering how much room you think there is – I mean, clearly, there was room to write this story, and there was room to publish it in this kind of anthology, which is a little surprising. And so I'm wondering, was this surprising to you? Or do you see stories like this not infrequently, in China now?

(19:01): **BINGBING SHI:** It's not a surprise for me. Actually, the short story was published in China. It was published in a literary journal, and also published in the author's short story collection. And I feel like the emotions in that short story are very strong. The author, Wen Zhen, writes very vividly, very subtle, with lots of energy, with lots of her own emotions. Maybe it's her own emotions, and also the character's own emotions. And that short story used a first-person narrator, and I was very touched by it. And it combined personal experience with the historical background. So I think it's a very good short story, and I'm so happy I could include it in this collection.

(19:58): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And then another short story that had interesting political undercurrents in it was "Blue Peony" by Ning Ken. So it's about this 11-year-old boy who lives with a yellow cat. He's been left behind by his older siblings, who have been 'sent down' to the countryside. So – it feels like it's the Cultural Revolution. And he's started to steal bones for the cat, to feed the cat, after having a complicated relationship with the cat, not really wanting to feed it or be around it. And he gets caught. What happens after that – and I won't ruin it for the reader – it has this tension of showing a level of fear, of kind of what was present in that moment, what he knew could happen to him, and it also shows humanity from someone who is in a position of authority, who could make his life much more difficult. So that, too, was interesting to me, that that was both published in Chinese, in China, and included in this anthology.

(21:03): **BINGBING SHI:** Yes. When I read that short story, Ning Ken's short story, I think it's warm, because the narrator is a little boy. But the story can also be profound. It can be read in different ways. So I think this is the power of literature. Yeah, it was published in China, and it was also published in a good journal. So, um, yeah. Ning Ken is a very famous writer, writing about – he lives in Beijing, and he writes a series of this kind of short stories about Beijing.

(21:41): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And award winning – he's won the Lu Xun, the Lao She, and the Shi Nai'an literary prizes. So, in your experience, is censorship something that writers in China these days just find a way of working around? It's there. It's worse now, stricter now, than it was when you started studying literature back in 2011. I mean, that was still a pretty open, more open, time.

(22:12): **BINGBING SHI:** I think the censorship is always there. But different writers, publishers, journals, they deal with this in different ways. So I think it really depends on different situations, at this moment. For example, when I select these short stories, I want to show what is happening, and also the history. This is

something that we cannot avoid, because it happened, in the city. I think I also considered – what I considered very much is about how good this short story is written, their narrative, their structure, their language, the plot.

(23:12): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. And there were of course also stories that, as you said, have this sort of universal quality to them, like people who, some years after getting out of – they were university classmates, right? They meet on the subway. They dive back into moments that were kind of raw and that really mattered to one of them. You can see them kind of feeling each other out, like ‘hmm, this might be interesting.’ And by the time one person gets off, that’s clearly not going to happen – quite a little drama, all within one short story. And then there’s the story that’s just, you’re reading it and suddenly you’re wondering, ‘whoa, what’s going on here?’ – about the Beijing Western Railway Station, where the railway station kind of has this sensibility of its own. It felt to me like a metaphor, in some ways, for how modern Beijing and modern China kind of have a way of taking over life, and have an energy and a momentum of their own.

(24:15): **BINGBING SHI:** Yes, I agree. When I was reading Han Song’s short story on Beijing West Station, it’s a metaphor. This city, with 20 million population, is like a gigantic machine. They absorb people, and then it changes people a lot. And for the subway one, I think it’s very common story that happens in the big city, like Beijing, where two people, and they were university classmates, they may have some romantic feelings. But then, they suffer from these burdens of life, like house price, they need to make a living to feed their children, all these kind of things. And then, two middle-aged people look back on their young age. What can be learned? It’s just like, you are each other’s passenger on this subway. And at some station, you need to leave. I think it’s like the relationships in these big cities, alienation, and people are lonely in this city.

(25:33): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, and probably more so with all of the breaking up of neighborhoods over the course of the last 20 or 30 years. There was one scene – I’m forgetting which short story it was in – where a little girl was leaving a building and it made her uncomfortable that there were always people sitting outside, playing mahjong or hanging out and chatting. That was still the Beijing that I saw when I first moved to Beijing in the mid-‘90s. And a lot of neighborhoods were leveled so that new high-rises could be built, and people were scattered to the Fifth Ring Road or even further out. And living in isolation in your own apartment – I certainly talked with people over time who expressed how lonely that felt.

(26:19): **BINGBING SHI:** Yes, like in my last year in Beijing, I lived in a single room in an apartment. And there were two or three flatmates in that flat. But actually, we never really talked. When we go back to the room, we closed the door. Even though we shared a kitchen and a toilet, we still didn’t really talk very much.

(26:45): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So – back to *The Book of Beijing*. Not only the authors, but also many of the translators in this anthology are heavy hitters – Eric Abrahamsen, who founded Paper Republic, and lived for 15 years in Beijing, Jack Hargreaves and Helen Wang, who also both have done translations and worked with Paper Republic, and they’ve also both done many other things – Helen is a curator at the British Museum. Did you choose the translators?

BINGBING SHI: No.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: The publisher chose them?

(27:15): **BINGBING SHI:** Yes, I think the chief editor of Comma, Ra, is a very experienced editor. He has a lot of connections with Paper Republic, and also Leeds Writing Center, New Chinese Writing Center in Leeds University. And I think he just had a feeling of which translator is suitable for which short story. And actually, they also organized a translation competition. I think they asked three translators in this connection. They are very young. They get (a) prize in that competition, so they got opportunities to translate short stories.

(27:56): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, one of the translators was actually a high school student.

BINGBING SHI: Yes, she won in a competition.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: It read well. It was a good, engaging story.

BINGBING SHI: Yes yes.

(28:08): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So how closely do you think the translated versions of the stories hew to the sensibility of the originals?

BINGBING SHI: This is a very good question. I read all the books, and I think the translators did a very, very good job. For example, the Wen Zhen one, “Date at the Art Gallery,” the translator conveyed very well the feelings and the power in that short story, as well as the subway one. I was very engaged, when I was reading the English translation.

(28:47): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** I remember hearing more than once, when I lived in China, the belief that only Chinese people can understand Chinese culture. But with an anthology like this, the goal, I would imagine, is to try to bring the reader in, no matter what their previous understanding of the place or the culture has been. How did you work at that, in the process of bringing this book together?

(29:12): **BINGBING SHI:** I – when I come to the UK, I was a little bit nervous, because I feel like – I’m going to go to another culture, in another country that I’m not very familiar with. But then, after I came here, I found that yeah, there are differences, but there were also lots and lots of similarities. And I think Chinese people, and also people from outside China, actually I think we are both curious about each other’s culture. So when I was doing this, I actually did not think very much how I can make English readers understand. I feel like, when I translate, we will understand each other, because this is how it is. This is what has happened, what the writer writes. I can’t change anything. I just translate it, put it together. And I think we can understand each other. Human nature is the same.

(30:24): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. I agree. Shifting topics a bit, tell me about your own writing. You’ve written a number of short stories yourself that have been published in Chinese literary journals. What’s an example or two of things you’ve focused on in your own stories?

BINGBING SHI: So the stories I published are more about the mother-daughter relationship. I want to write more from a feminism perspective, like understand how my generation, our struggles in China. So I think mother-daughter relationship, all the women in my hometown, who suffered a lot of like, the custom of marriage or something. So I’d like to write about the questions, the problems I’m concerned with. And this is really very related to my own life experience.

(31:20): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Huh. Interesting. So what have you learned from editing this anthology that you might bring into your own writing?

BINGBING SHI: I actually learned a lot. The most important thing is how to write a short story well. I’m still learning, but I think writing a very good short story is difficult. You can’t write too long, but you want to make it as deep as possible. So you need to take a very short moment of life, and make it meaningful, profound, and also touching.

(32:04): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And when you write, up until this point, anyway, who have you been thinking of as your audience?

BINGBING SHI: I think, I hope, young generation in China. I know people at my age, and also young people in China, and women, so now we are facing a lot of – like, we need to think a lot. For example, like your parents want you to get married, want you to have children as soon as possible. Also, like the social stress. The whole society wants – they want the kind of, the women that, this kind of social restriction, and family’s expectation, and also your own pursuit, what you want to do in your career. You want to become what kind of woman? These are the questions I’m very much concerned about. Like, in this patriarchal society, as an individual woman, how can you reach your potential, and do the things you want? How can you help more people? So these are the things I’m concerned about.

(32:24): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, really important, essential questions. You said you especially want to reach young Chinese women. What about reaching an audience outside of China, in translation?

BINGBING SHI: Yes, I very much want to, because the young people throughout the world share lots of similarities, like this kind of pressures, and then the woman’s situation in the workplace, in the family. So, I very, very much want to reach the readers outside China. But it depends on my writing ability. I will try my best.

(34:08): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Back to Beijing. This book, *The Book of Beijing*, has it changed your own feelings and understandings of Beijing, over the course of the time you’ve worked on this?

BINGBING SHI: Actually, no. Because the stories here are the Beijing I’m familiar with, like the hutong and the historical part of Beijing, the art gallery, the love story, the marriage, the relationship – the short stories in this book are close to my life.

(34:45): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What impact do you hope it will have on readers who aren’t so familiar with Beijing?

BINGBING SHI: I hope this book can increase their interest, and – go to Beijing, go to China one day, or maybe change their impression that China is always a very military, very political, very far-away country. Maybe I want to tell them that the things happening in China are the same as the things that happened around me. And maybe they can go to China one day, if they have interest, or make some Chinese friends, or even eat some Chinese food.

(35:31): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, that’s not a hard sell. (Laughs) A lot of people, I think, look forward to eating Chinese food. One final question – do you have any other favorite books in which Beijing is kind of its own character?

(35:45): **BINGBING SHI:** When I was selecting this, I actually read some of Xu Zechen’s books. He writes a lot. I think Eric (Abrahamson) translated some of his novels. His writing is very much about Beijing in 2005 – like, the first 10 years of the 21st century in Beijing, when at that time those who were like people in margined

areas, margin people in Beijing, how do they make a living, and how do they pursue their dreams in this big city? Yeah, and I also know Wen Zhen. She is a novelist living in Beijing. And now she's also writing a lot about young people's life in Beijing. And another one, Shuang Xuetao – he is also living in Beijing now, even though he is a representative of northeastern literature – Dongbei wen xue. But he's also living in Beijing, and he writes some stories set in, happened in Beijing.

(36:44): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Those are great suggestions. BINGBING SHI, thank you for this conversation, and congratulations on your PhD, and on the publication of *The Book of Beijing*.

BINGBING SHI: Thank you so much.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: That's Bingbing Shi curator and editor of *The Book of Beijing: A City in Short Fiction*. Right at the end, there, Bingbing mentions three authors. Here are a few more details on each:

Xu Zechen is one of the short story writers in *The Book of Beijing*, also has the novels *Beijing Sprawl* and *Running Through Beijing* available in English translation by Eric Abrahamsen, founder of Paper Republic, which promotes Chinese literature in translation. Eric also translated Xu Zechen's short story *Secretly* in *The Book of Beijing* – about how a counterfeiter of fake IDs who's long lived on the edge, starts considering a normal life.

The second recommendation Bingbing made was of **Wen Zhen**, who wrote the short story "Date at the Art Gallery" in *The Book of Beijing*, which we talked about in this episode. She also has her own book of short stories in English translation, called *Nothing but the Now*.

And finally, **Shuang Xuetao**, the Dongbei/northeastern China writer – not in *The Book of Beijing*, but he does have his own book in English translation. It's called *Rouge Street*, and it consists of three novellas set in northeastern China, about people left behind by China's economic miracle. The *New York Times Book Review* has named it an editor's choice and says, quoting here: "from start to finish, his scope is close to the ground, his language sparingly emotive and unobtrusive. He never flinches. As a result, we don't look away either."

The book titles, and the spellings of all these names, and a full transcript of this episode are available on the website of The China Books Review at chinabooksreview.com, along with the full archive of China Books podcast episodes. While you're there, check out the China Books Review's many thought-provoking essays, reviews, interviews with authors, and more, curated by editor Alec Ash. If you'd like to pitch him an essay or review of your own, you can contact him at editor@chinabooksreview.com.

The China Books podcast is a companion of the China Books Review, which is co-published by The Wire China, founded and led by Pulitzer Prize-winning former New York Times China business correspondent David Barboza, and by Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations, where Orville Schell is director, and I'm a senior fellow. I'm also the editor and producer of this podcast, which comes out every first Tuesday of the month, and focuses on books and ideas from China and about China. If you've got an idea for an episode, or want to send any other feedback, shoot me a line at mmagistad@asiasociety.org.

If you like the podcast, tell a friend or two about it. And, if the spirit moves you, leave a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps others find it.

That's it for this episode. Thanks so much for listening. See you next time – and meanwhile, happy reading. ■