

F		A		C		T		I		V		A		FLIP THROUGH YOUR FACTIVA ALERTS Now Available on Flipboard DOW JONES Learn more at factiva.com
RELIABLE ALERTING	9 INTERFACE LANGUAGES		EASILY DISSEMINATE INFO	COVERAGE FROM NEARLY EVERY COUNTRY										

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
 WSJ.com

January 29, 2015, 3:28 PM HKT

Turning the World's Largest Human Migration Into a Play: Q&A with Frances Cowhig



A scene from Ms. Cowhig's new play.
 Goodman Theatre

When Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig embarked on writing “The World of Extreme Happiness,” a play that follows one young woman’s migration from China’s countryside to a factory in Shenzhen, she wanted to make sure the play didn’t put China in a negative or positive light. Instead, she wanted to try to make Sunny, the main character, a tragic hero, such as in Arthur Miller’s “Tragedy and the Common Man,” a play that also shows the challenges of a person trying to find his rightful place in society. “Sunny grows and ultimately makes a sacrifice knowing the consequences,” Ms. Cowhig says.

After running in London and Chicago, “The World of Extreme Happiness” debuts in New York at the Manhattan Theatre Club on February 3. The playwright, who spent some of her childhood growing up in China and Taiwan, spoke with the Wall Street Journal from her home in New York. Edited excerpts:

What was your inspiration for writing the play?

I wanted to write something about China and one of the largest human migrations in world, that of from the countryside to the city. A lot of plays in the western theater tradition are through a Western lens and I wanted to write a play told completely through the lives of the Chinese people. One thing I noticed while living in China is there are two completely different islands of existence in China, the older generation versus the younger generation, whose reality has been shaped by totally different contexts.

You spent several years in China as a child. How did that play a role in how you wrote the play?

My dad worked for the U.S. State Department and I lived in Beijing for five years. I saw Beijing at a time of huge change, starting from when [the city] got the Olympics bid to 2001. It was a crazy period of change and I saw a lot of surreal things, like seeding clouds to make it rain for clear blue skies and spray-painting all the trees green by my diplomatic compound. Later on [my parents] moved to Chengdu while I was in graduate school and I stayed with them for several months. My mother is from rural Taiwan and one of her brothers managed a shoe factory in southern China, so I was able to get a glimpse into that world as well.

What was the most challenging part of writing the play?

I didn't want this to be propaganda or an anti-China play, or just one point of view about China, so I spent a lot of time thinking through how to show how complicated things are.

So many people have had the experience of Sunny in China. Who did you base your research on to get an adequate view of a migrant factory worker?

Leslie Chang's book, *Factory Girl*, was one of the biggest influences for getting into the world on the ground level. A number of films also helped, such as *The Last Train Home* [about migrant workers who travel home for the Chinese spring festival] and *24 City* [about how China's modernization affects three generations in Chengdu]. There are really a lot of great documentaries coming out of China and between those and having conversations with Chinese writers, I got a good sense of what was going on.

Much of the play shows the schisms between the older generation and the younger generation. What was your aim here?

Most people in the western world, the main genocide they're familiar with is the Holocaust. They don't know about Mao and the Chinese famine and what was happening during the Cultural Revolution. [Chinese writer] Liao Yiwu once described China is a nation full of people with PTSD. So many parts of [China's history] weren't said, weren't communicated between generations.

What's next for you?

I have two more plays inspired by the lives of Chinese citizens. I'll be adapting *Corpse Walker*, which is a collection of Liao Yiwu's interviews with people from the bottom of Chinese society and I'm working on a play about how the Chinese government ran for-profit blood banks [in the 1990s], which led to a massive rural AIDS epidemic.

– Edited from an interview with Alyssa Abkowitz