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Once Upon a Chinese Childhood

The odds were that Lijia Zhang, the daughter of Chinese factory workers, would end up in the factory herself in the China of the 1980s. And that is exactly what happened - initially. In 1980, just four years after the death of Mao, a time of some upheaval in China, the 16-year-old Zhang was packed off to take her mother's place in a state-owned missile factory in Nanjing. It was, by her family's standards, a good job in harsh economic times, and that should have been the end of the story. But Zhang was an unusually bright student who had ambitions to become a journalist.

The story of how she journeyed from a decade as an obedient factory girl to writer, sexual being, and political activist in an ever-changing China makes for fascinating, compelling reading in her new book, "Socialism is Great! A Worker's Memoir of the New China." Kirkus Reviews calls it "a notable historical document and a vivid, affecting portrait of a young girl's resolve," and the New York Times Book Review issued a thumbs up in the April 13 section.

Zhang will appear at Borders Books & Music in Nassau Park in West Windsor on Tuesday, May 6.

Speaking by phone from her home in Beijing, Zhang makes it clear that initially she had every intention of swallowing her disappointment at not moving on to a university and was determined to make the best of her new life as a worker. "At 16, I was a faithful member of the Communist Youth League, and I worked very hard and tried to behave at the factory," she says. "But the concept of individualism slowly took root in me, and I began to rebel when I found out what fun it is to rebel and what fun it is to be naughty."

Unwittingly, the grinding, highly regulated worker's system of the times contributed to Zhang's rebellion. More attention was paid to mind-numbing rules than to production. The factory was required to employ a certain number of laborers; Zhang's shop didn't have enough work for all of them. Many of them slacked off; Zhang passed the hours by reading and teaching herself English. In his jacket blurb for "Socialism is Great!" New Yorker writer Peter Hessler compares Zhang to David Copperfield. But Zhang says she relates more to Jane Eyre.

"Learning English had broadened my horizons and liberated my mind," she says. "Now, looking back, what I learned, of course, wasn't just ABCs, but the whole cultural package. Jane Eyre played a role in this transformation. It was one of the first books I read in English, and it just struck a chord. To begin with, I identified with Jane Eyre, who isn't beautiful or charming as many leading ladies in classic novels are. Yet underneath her unremarkable looks, there is so much passion and spirit. I totally understood her wish to be independent, her deep need to love and to be loved, and her hope of seeing and interacting with a bigger world. And she is a rebel, too. Jane Eyre became my inspiring model."

It was lucky that Zhang had Jane Eyre to inspire her, because those around her, family and fellow workers, were not encouraging to her ambitions. Her sister advised her earnestly, "Don't try to be different," and her co-workers derided her as "the toad that wants to eat swan meat."

Zhang's mother, too, was an obstacle, albeit an obstacle with Zhang's best interest at heart. Zhang's mother, a bright woman, had suffered much in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, a time that culminated in the terror of absolutism, when neighbors spied upon neighbors and sons denounced fathers. Zhang's mother was arrested on vague charges (radicals found a spoon in her flat marked "USA"), and she survived interrogation and torture. The effect was familiar, a desire to go along and stay out of trouble. Zhang's father had also gotten into trouble earlier; his wife determined that part of his problem was "too many books," and her fierce desire for her daughter's safety and welfare was the focus of many battles between mother and daughter, who had more in common, temperamentally, than either suspected.

Zhang's form of rebellion first manifested itself in wearing bright clothes and studying English. It later led her to sexual experimentation, at the risk of being labeled a "fairy fox," a seductive woman. Her choice of men may not have always been wise, but she professes herself grateful for what she learned from each encounter, as any true romantic does.

"Socialism is Great!" ends as Zhang gets in serious trouble by organizing demonstrations of Nanjing workers in support of the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989. She wriggled out of that one, and fled to England with her Scottish boyfriend, whom she married. Three years later, they returned to China. Zhang, who has two daughters and is divorced, now writes for international publications and contributes to BBC Radio and NPR, and she acknowledges that her story might not have even been published in the repressive era of the China of the 1980s.

"There were many people who were hassled for helping Western journalists," she says frankly. "China still has a real lack of democracy, and a lack of human rights. But there is a lot more tolerance; people enjoy a lot more personal freedoms now."

Her story has not yet been published in Chinese, and she is unsure what the reaction will be. She says, "I think many people will be very sympathetic. But I don't think the government will be happy about it. The New York Times review ran in the International Herald Tribune, so I went to buy a copy, and got home to find that the page had been cut out. I went back, and in all copies that page has gone missing. So obviously the authorities don't like it."

Still, Zhang doesn't worry for her personal safety. She points out that some things have changed as China makes its moves towards becoming a major player on the international market.

"Overall, I think that there more opportunities in China for ambitious young people now. It absolutely has to do with capitalism and market-driven economy. It has just opened up chances and life for the better."

It is also worth noting that Zhang has no hesitation in making her political opinions known in today's China, as well. She expresses herself on the explosive issue of Tibet. She feels deeply

that "Tibetans should be allowed to be Tibetans and practice their religion." But she feels that "for once" the Chinese government has been unjustly criticized for its handling of the complicated Tibetan situation, and there is some justification in the widespread Chinese anger over the Western media, which they see as biased. Hard to imagine a woman of an earlier generation, like Zhang's mother or grandmother, broadcasting their thoughts in public.

"In a way, I'm glad there is no Chinese translation (of the book)," Zhang admits. "I don't think I said anything very hurtful or untruthful, but still, the relationship with your family is often not straightforward. I think I make it clear from the beginning that I knew my mother's good intentions. She didn't get a lot of choices, and was a very strong person who went through a lot. My grandma belonged to the older generation who never put her personal interests first. She really lived entirely for other people. I compare myself to her - I want a lot from life. I love my children. I will do anything I can for my children, but my own happiness is very important - my own passion, my career. I want to pursue these things. And that is what I thought the ordinary American reader can relate to - my struggle and my hopes."

She is no longer "The toad that wants to eat swan meat." In telling her story, the toad has turned into a princess.

Author Event, Tuesday, May 6, Noon. Borders Books, 601 Nassau Park. Lijia Zhang, author of "Socialism is Great," presents a discussion and booksigning. Zhang's memoir includes her memories of her youth in Nanjing, as a participant in the Tiananmen Square protest, and her teenage years in a factory producing missiles to reach North America. A resident of Beijing, she is an international journalist and a regular speaker on BBC Radio and NPR. 609-514-0040.