

## **\*From factory worker to international sophisticate**

Bold and ambitious

from a young age, Zhang Lijia has fulfilled her dream of becoming a writer, reports Didi Kirsten Tatlow \*

24 February 2008

South China Morning Post

English

(c) 2008 South China Morning Post Publishers Limited, Hong Kong. All rights reserved.

Clocking in day after day at a giant military factory in Nanjing in mainland China where she worked for 10 mind-numbing years in the 1980s, Zhang \*Lijia\* dreamt of escape. Her route out was to learn English, even if her fellow workers mocked her as "a toad who wants to eat swan's meat" - someone with ambitions way beyond her station.

Zhang learnt English in secret. And along with the language came a political, spiritual and sexual awakening as she gained not only a new soul - "to learn another language is to gain another soul", as the first Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne famously remarked. She also earned her ticket out of a life of drudgery.

The top-secret rocket factory where she began working at the age of 16 provided housing, a kindergarten, meals and showers, in a numbing, cradle-to-grave "iron rice bowl". It also curtailed all talent and ambition: Zhang was denied promotion on the grounds that her naturally curly hair, rare in a Chinese, represented a bourgeois-capitalist outlook. And she even had to show her stained sanitary napkins every month to the "period police" to prove she wasn't pregnant.

Today Zhang, 43 - whose first book, a powerfully written, vivid memoir of those years entitled *Socialism is Great*, comes out at the end of March with Atlas & Co - lives in Beijing with her two daughters, 10-year-old May and eight-year-old Kirsti. "I always wanted to be a writer or a journalist," said Zhang.

But the road from factory girl to Beijing-based international sophisticate, British citizen and mother of two has not been quick. "It has been a long, slow process. When I was young I was always very ambitious, I did well academically and put everything in writing. Even today I write all the time in my diary. I write when I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm lonely."

Zhang dreamed of going to university. But disaster struck at 16, when her mother took her out of school and placed her in "Liming" as the factory is called in her book. Zhang felt her fate bitterly. Her mother feared that her daughter, however bright, had a slim chance of getting into university (her husband, a clerk in the reform-through-labour system, had a "bad political background"). And she feared that Zhang would end up jobless, like so many others in the city.

As well as circuitous, the road was occasionally dangerous for the girl from Nanjing, who grew up sleeping in the same bed as her beloved grandmother and wastrel brother until she was 16, with five people squeezed into a two-room apartment.

During the 1989 student democracy movement, Zhang organised factory workers to march in support of the students, even addressing the crowd at Nanjing's Gulou, or Drum Tower, the focus of the protests. Questioned by the police after the bloody crackdown on June 4th, Zhang confounded them with her answers: no, the poem she read to the crowd was not by a reactionary, but by Bei Dao, a legally published, "Misty Poet". Finally, she was let go.

The future beckoned. The summer before, aged 24, she had met her future husband, a British tourist, in an ice cream queue outside the Forbidden City in Beijing. "He didn't speak a word of Chinese back then." Her English broke the ice.

Always bold - outrageously so for a young Chinese girl in the 1980s - Zhang recounts several affairs in her memoir, including how she lost her virginity on a wooden board (or "bride board") in the factory workshop. "They would have butchered me if they found me out," she said reflectively, sitting in an easy chair in a Beijing cafe, sipping coffee.

Zhang married her foreign sweetheart in 1990, but not before her sister "bought" her freedom from the factory via guanxi she had earned from her government job.

Motherhood and divorce followed, interspersed always with writing and a sojourn in Oxford, where her husband was a university student. "When I was there I had to learn to argue differently. In China, you said: 'Wrong! Wrong!' I had to learn to say: 'I see what you mean, but the way I see it is like this'. You could not just say 'You're wrong!'"

The decade spent checking pressure gauges was a frustrating and miserable time for Zhang, but the experience probably made her a writer. Even at 16, she was savvy enough to sense that she could use it to grow.

Informed of her future, the young girl cried hysterically for hours, then drifted off to sleep, comforted by the thought that Nikolai Ostrovski, the Soviet author of *How Steel Is Made*, one of her favourite books at the time (the other one was *Jane Eyre*) had never gone to university either. "Perhaps my first-hand experience with the sweat of the proletariat would enrich my life and writing too?"

It has indeed.