

# Party Girl

In this memoir, Lijia Zhang describes coming of age in 1980s China.

BY JOSEPH KAHN

THE 1980s were a heady and befuddling time of change in China. The Communist Party never acknowledged the pain inflicted by Mao's interminable political struggles and mass mobilizations. But after his death in 1976, it eased its grip and opened up the economy just enough that

## "SOCIALISM IS GREAT!"

A Worker's Memoir of the New China.

By Lijia Zhang.

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some of the urban youth could start earning enough to focus on their own desires.

Lijia Zhang is a child of the 1980s. In "Socialism Is Great," her coming-of-age memoir, that decade is to her what the 1960s were to American baby boomers. Zhang grew up in Nanjing, a faded former capital on the Yangtze River, at a time when her family, friends and bosses were trying to divine the new social and economic order. Her reflexively cautious mother lived a life of stultifying routine, working at a state-owned missile factory. In spite of this, Zhang developed a love of money, personal freedom, self-education and sexual adventure that seemed to spring from some gene of individualism rendered only temporarily recessive by Mao's policies.

Autobiographical accounts by people who have endured the political crusades and intense psychological dramas of Communist China abound. The most harrowing examples to appear in English are Jung Chang's multigenerational family history, "Wild Swans," and Nien-Cheng's "Life and Death in Shanghai." Both women survived relentless assaults on their families and their dignity, and fled China to tell their stories.

Because of the popularity of such books, Zhang's memoir, with its arc of resistance and personal struggle, at first feels familiar. But Zhang's tale, written in fluent English peppered with dated Chinese idioms, begins where those older memoirs leave

off. She devotes so much more attention to boyfriends than to politics that her relationship to politics, though crucial to the climax of the book, comes across as a casual flirtation.

Ambitious from a young age, Zhang grew up battling her conservative mother — "a four-horse cart could not hold her back," Zhang writes — who dominated their dysfunctional family. Her father, mostly absent, got into political trouble in the 1950s, and the mother blamed his recklessness for books and ideas. The mother struggled to support the family on her meagre state salary and belittled Zhang's aspirations of becoming a writer.

Zhang's plans to attend college were quashed when her mother took advantage of an early retirement program at her factory that allowed her to name her daughter



as her successor. In 1980, when she was 16 and her friends were gearing up to compete in college entrance exams, Zhang became a worker at the Liming Machinery Factory.

Liming made intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads as well as artillery and guns. Its production was a high-level state secret. But Zhang was assigned to a minor workshop, where her colleagues took advantage of their sick leave and undermined their rivals. In her ample free time, she began reading a form of protest literature known as Misty Poetry. She also taught herself English by listening to the music of the Carpenters and devouring classic English novels. During interminable political study sessions, she read "Jane Eyre," hiding it behind "The People's Daily."

She had her first taste of political trouble when a boss discovered her trick. Zhang seems to have

modeled herself after the English governess who defied society's conception of her proper place.

Though Zhang describes herself as ugly, she had few inhibitions when it came to men. Infatuated with a college student she met while climbing a mountain, she took a train to Beijing to visit him, becoming the first person in her family to see the capital. He greeted her coolly. She woke in the middle of the night to find him and another woman squirming in the next bed.

Zhang had imagined her wedding night, when she would give herself away in a room wallpapered with the Chinese character for "double happiness." Instead she meets a television producer with a "general's belly" who has other ideas. "I became a 'bride' on a hard wooden board," she writes, "on the floor of my workshop, where the air was rank with industrial grease and the only wall decoration was a yellowing list of the rules I was breaking."

Her first brush with the police comes a short time later, when she seduces a married government official in a public park and the two are discovered in flagrante. More lovers and heartbreaks follow, as does an abortion — and a political awakening. The men in her life spur her to greater learning; she discovers the hypocrites of China's authoritarian regime partly through their teachings, partly through their betrayals. One boyfriend introduces her to the theory of "oriental despotism," which says the need to mobilize large numbers of people for public works projects helped pave the way for repressive regimes. She is later surprised to discover the theory was "borrowed" from the West. Still, Zhang writes, "I was nevertheless more grateful than annoyed," since the men she'd loved "had each broadened my horizons."

Suddenly and somewhat incongruously, in the spring of 1989, Zhang mobilizes workers at her arms factory to rise up in a long-distance show of support for the pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square. The police take her in for questioning. Her story and the decade end without her revealing the repercussions. Zhang now works as a journalist in Beijing. She seems to suggest that in the 1980s, Chinese politics had evolved enough that they could be a quixotic diversion for a restless and headstrong girl. □

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