

The Reluctant Communist/ Charles Robert Jenkins/ University of California Press/ £14.95. "Socialism is Great!"/ Lijia Zhang/ Atlas & Co/ £14.99

Sergeant Robert Jenkins deserted and defected to North Korea on the 5th January 1965. He finally left North Korea with his two teenage daughters to rejoin his wife Hitomi in Japan in July 2004 all but forty years later. This is his story. Growing up poor the Army was both an escape from poverty and a fashion makeover. You got to open the box and take the money. You had glamour and the girls. But life on the frontline was less fun. In 1964 the Vietnam War was ratchetting up with Jenkins' Unit on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea targeted for transfer. Jenkins had a flavour of what was to come and it was not to his taste. On the DMZ the US - despite all their denials - were dispatching 'Hunter-killer teams' into the North to capture and kill enemy soldiers. Jenkins fled instead to a hero's welcome.

'Reluctant Communist' paints a bleak picture of the next four decades. Alongside three fellow deserters he lived a life of quiet desperation. It was a bleak existence of too little food, too much alcohol and fags, alternately frozen in Winter and baked in Summer, only mitigated by visits to the 'Rakwon' hard currency shop for a taste of Western luxuries. The four were found wives. They were definally not Korean, but Thai, Romanian and Lebanese alongside Jenkins Japanese abductee. It was Jenkins lucky day when he married Hitomi. For when Kim Jung Il admitted at the North Korea - Japan Summit that 'rogue elements' in the Administration had abducted a number of Japanese nationals and they would be allowed to return home Jenkins got a free ride.

The abductees went back in October 2002. It took Jenkins another twenty-one months as Pyongyang, than Washington, wanted him for a series of offences including 'soliciting others to desert' and 'aiding the enemy'. After a series of diplomatic interventions - even a European Parliament resolution urged he should be allowed to rejoin his wife - it turned out that twenty-five days in the brig would be enough. 'The Reluctant Communist' is written with purpose. Pyongyang is purgatory. Yet another face of exile peeps out. Jenkins describes how he became a filmstar playing in 'Nameless Heroes' - North Korea's answer to 'Mash' - the evil capitalist Dr Kelton. As a result he was pursued by autograph hunters and through the contacts he made blackmarket access to books and films. Equally the filmmaker Nick Bonner who last year produced 'Crossing the Line' a documentary about Joseph Dresnok the only defector still remaining in the North, the other three have died including the last defector to come over Joseph White in 1982, shows a very different Jenkins. Here life seems to have a rosier hue and we see Jenkins and his three comrades as the hedonistic poster boys of Pyongyang's glossies.

Lijia Zhang, in contrast, is an autodidact that worked her way up from poverty and the factory floor. Aged sixteen and a promising student she was denied a place at University because of her father's 'political problems'. Consequently she was pulled out of school by her mother, to replace her when she took early retirement from her job on the acid pickling line at the Ministry of Aerospace's Liming Machinery Factory. Liming in Nanjing was responsible for the development and production of China's Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. Not that that mattered to Lijia stuck in the overmanned and underworked Work Unit Number Twenty Three, the gauge testing department. Desperate to escape her 'iron rice bowl' job for life and a Stakhanovite by nature and training she signed up for the new TV University.

She passed with flying colours, but was denied the expected promotion because of 'political problems' again. This only made her more of a rebel. 'Socialism is Great!' follows her revolt in fashion, ideas and action. With the help of a series of male mentors/lovers she adopted colourful western dress, Nietzsche, Kafka and the much frowned on Misty Poetry, whose sense of ennui certainly was not designed to motivate the masses. Then English was to become the key to escape. Lijia took up the language as if her life depended on it.

In some senses it did. English was learnt playing truant from her work in the malodorous surroundings of the factory waste dump as in her private life men came, betrayed and went. One leaving her with the gift of an illegal abortion. As Liming arms were turned into ploughshares as the winds of change and the new drive for profit saw the factory win a bid to cast a giant bronze Buddha. By 1989 she was one of the leading organisers of the largest demonstration of Nanjing workers in support of the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square. The book finishes as, post-Tiananmen, the Public Security Bureau take her in for questioning. Jenkins' book is a catalogue of apologies moans and complaints. Zhang in contrast lifts with its endurance, stoicism and joy. Zhang leaves you wanting more!

Glyn Ford