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August 2008

A Worker's Life in The New China

Reviewed by Nick Frisch

Posted August 11, 2008

"SOCIALISM IS GREAT!": A WORKER'S MEMOIR OF THE NEW CHINA
by Lijia Zhang

Atlas & Co., 357 pages, \$24

Much of the West's fascination with China comes not just from the scale of its transformation, but the Maoist basket-case baseline from which the economy and society has made such a spectacular recovery. Chinese contemporary art, in particular, has made several fortunes from Cultural Revolution imagery, and English-language memoirs from that period number in the dozens, from Wild Swans to Son of the Revolution. During the Hong Kong handover decennial fanfare, performances of The Red Detachment of Women (a visiting Nixon's entertainment) and the Yellow River Concerto (a Jiang Qing favorite) were packed to the rafters. The Chairman's likeness adorns bookbags in London and tight-fitting shirts in Beijing nightclubs. There is a resurgent fashion for, in Tom Wolfe's immortal phrase, "radical chic."

Less otherworldly is the no-nonsense reign of Deng Xiaoping, himself a victim of Mao's excesses. China, still gray and inefficient, politically and economically crippled, began a slow, steady process that, barring the occasional massacre, was long on stability and short of upheavals, an era more pragmatic than dramatic.

Sexy it is not, but the Deng era did eventually lead us to the stage where Beijing can host the Olympics and \$20 DVD players are the norm. Economists, historians and political scientists have given this pivotal time extensive coverage, but the English-speaking world has heard much less from musicians, artists and writers.

Zhang Lijia's "Socialism is Great!" is a superb new memoir of the "opening

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and reform" period, perhaps the best available in English. Not quite a teenager at Mao's death, Ms. Zhang soon found herself forced to take over her retiring mother's factory post, a fate bitterly resisted by the aspiring university student and journalist. While chained to the inefficient workshop, she takes new and decreasingly formalized opportunities to study and learn English. In the very ordinary city of Nanjing, glimmers of enormous change surface in everyday life: her tax-collector friend supplements his state employee's salary with a street-side kebab stand, a local hair salon starts to offer perms and petty bribery becomes routine. Pop music and mannerisms (like the V-finger "peace" symbol that seems obligatory for every photographed Asian) begin to filter in from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Ms. Zhang's factory—a top producer of long-range ballistic missiles—gets the contract to cast the enormous Buddha on Hong Kong's Lantau Island.

Zhang's matter-of-fact inclusion of these details into stories of everyday life is a welcome counterbalance to ample academic sources on the period. Less novel but interesting nonetheless, "Socialism is Great!" also works tolerably well as a coming-of-age story about sexual discovery in a time of shifting values. She writes fearlessly, and fondly, of her affairs with a married man, artists, students and others. Well-placed bribes keep an abortion from becoming a scandal. We see, rendered in stark relief, the competing pressures of traditional family expectations, still-strong Party control and fledgling individualism.

No portrait of China in the 1980s can omit the episodic student movements that culminated in 1989. The high drama of the final crackdown—and the political deep freeze since—tend to obscure the fact that street protests by students were fairly common, and not all bloodily suppressed, throughout the decade. It is, again, instructive to see the endpoint of 1989—in which Ms. Zhang is implicated—put into the context of the numerous student demonstrations that dot the 1980s and stretch back in a long tradition to the May 4th Movement and beyond. As a university town, Nanjing provides plenty for Ms. Zhang to witness and describe in her natural, accessible and extremely readable prose.

Translators of Chinese into English have often struggled with the former language's florid idioms. "Socialism is Great!" accomplishes the extremely rare feat of rendering readable, natural English without compromising these features of the Chinese descriptive idiom. Richness of idiomatic usage is often a product of level of education, and Ms. Zhang is candid about the moments when her interrupted studies leave her searching for certain phrases, or dropping extra idioms into conversation to seem more cultured.

Key terms from the period surface naturally, as if in conversation—getihu for the newly permitted individual businesses, or reyan for a strain of post-Mao ostentation. Meanwhile, the danwei (work unit) and tiefanwan (iron rice bowl, a.k.a. cradle-to-grave government welfare) are breaking down, as is Ms. Zhang's own notion of tinghua, obedience but literally "listening to speech." Explications of these terms, which in Chinese invoke a constellation of concepts not present in the English, are neither unwieldy nor overwrought, but well-integrated into the prose. A reader with no China background can expect a surprisingly good education in key concepts, perspectives and buzzwords of the period.

Ms. Zhang ends her book in 1989, under interrogation for her role in the nationwide protests that met a bloody end in Beijing. She has since married and divorced an Englishman (with whom she co-authored another book), and is currently writing her first novel, about prostitution. China's sex industry is vast and cruel, and may well make for an engrossing piece of fiction. But my hunch is that Ms. Zhang will remain best known as the writer who gave the English-speaking world a rare look at the human dimension of Deng's 1980s; an individual's-eye-view of the first, cautious changes that brought China to where it is today. Political passion and victimhood might sell better, but Ms. Zhang's story of striving—and, perhaps more importantly, its context—is much more germane to China today.

Nicholas Frisch is a free-lance writer based in Beijing.

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