

At the heart of the revolution

This Chinese writer fears rampant materialism has taken over from spirituality and culture in her homeland.

INTERVIEW 2

LIJIA ZHANG
TALKS TO DAN EDWARDS

CHINA, late 1986. Students are on the streets demanding democracy, private enterprise is rearing its head for the first time in a generation and Nanjing factory worker Lijia Zhang is losing her virginity on the floor of her workshop.

The location was born of necessity rather than choice but in mid-1980s China, premarital sex anywhere was a brave flouting of social mores. "Nothing less than a shameful and immoral act that can't be tolerated by our country's law," the 44-year-old journalist and mother of two jokily recalls in her new memoir, *Socialism Is Great!*

Bookshop shelves are heavy with tales of woe from the first decades of the People's Republic but, for most Australian readers, China's tumultuous 1980s remain a blank. Stepping into the breach, Zhang provides a lively account of love, sex and intellectual ferment growing up in Nanjing, southern China, between 1980 and 1989.

It was a time when China was being swept along by a tidal wave of economic reforms unleashed by Deng Xiaoping in the wake of Mao's death.

"Somehow that era just got lost," says Zhang, sitting in her spacious but slightly chaotic Beijing apartment. "Yet it was such an exciting time, when all the changes started to happen."

In December 1980, at the age of 16, Zhang was pulled from school by her mother and thrust into the cold world of Liming, a state-owned missile factory in Nanjing. "My mother was a worker and she never saw the benefit of education," she says.

In the factory, Zhang found her every material need catered for but her life closely monitored and choices severely circumscribed. One of her memoir's most shocking passages details how female workers had to show a blood-stained sanitary towel to family-planning staff every month before a fresh supply was doled out. Failure to provide evidence of menstruation meant a compulsory gynaecological check-up.

Chafing at the restrictions of factory life,



Factory fodder ... for Lijia Zhang, writing is a way of making sense of her life.

Zhang escaped into literature and taught herself English, later shoring up her knowledge through an open university program. She also sought love in a series of increasingly fraught affairs, recalled in the book with unflinching detail.

For all the determination and spirit she shows in *Socialism Is Great!*, Zhang cuts a surprisingly vulnerable figure in the flesh. Bespectacled, tall, with a mane of curly hair, it's easy to picture her as a young girl standing out from the factory crowd. But despite a successful career as a journalist, co-authorship

of the 1999 book *China Remembers* and the publication of her memoirs, she still dwells on her curtailed schooling. "I do feel sorry for myself," she says.

A desire "to be compensated" has seen her spend two periods studying in Britain, the first for a diploma in journalism from 1990 to 1992. After that she returned to China to pursue a career. She got her start in the media with Australia's ABC radio. "I helped Ali Moore, the ABC bureau chief, with interpreting and gave her suggestions and ideas. And then ABC TV hired me," she says.

Since her days in the factory, however, Zhang had harboured ambitions to write. "I got my first breakthrough with *Newsweek* in May 1996. I wrote about a socialist model village, Dazhai, and how it had become commercialised. Shortly after I became pregnant with my first child I gave up the full-time ABC job [in September 1996] and decided to pursue my own freelance writing. Looking back, that's probably the best decision I ever made." Her journalism has since appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Independent* and *South China Morning Post* among other publications.

In December 2000, she wrote a piece for *The Wall Street Journal Asia* about her experiences in the missile factory, provoking surprise among many who knew her. "Lots of my friends never knew I'd come from a worker background. They thought I was better educated. They said, 'Why don't you write a book?' I started some research and realised although the market had been flooded by China memoirs, few are set in the 1980s."

Drawing on her extensive diaries, Zhang refined her memoir while studying for a master's in creative and life writing at Goldsmiths in London. The project took nearly four years to complete.

"Writing has always been my way of making sense of my life," Zhang says.

The memoir was also born of a desire to "commemorate that bygone era, which I think deserves to be remembered. Overall, there was a lot more control then but in terms of art, people dared more, they experimented more. Today's Chinese young people are far more self-centred, far more materialistic. I was just a factory worker but we talked very passionately about China's future. People now are so busy making money everything else is just secondary."

Zhang lives comfortably in Beijing's embassy district but retains the curious air of boldness and insecurity that permeates her character in *Socialism Is Great!* And she continues to believe her own life and that of the nation should amount to more than just striving for material comfort.

"I just hope this is a passing phase China has to go through, where people want to get richer and get a certain material security, and then they will want more spiritual fulfilment."

If the Chinese Government would allow writers such as Zhang to publish in their own country, that would be a step in the right direction.

Spirited account of a nation coming of age

MEMOIR

Socialism Is Great! A Worker's Memoir Of The New China

By Lijia Zhang
UWA Press, 388pp, \$24.95

Reviewed by Kirsty Needham

LIJIA ZHANG is a persistent romantic navigating the bleak, concrete mess of 1980s China. Looking through her glasses – the strangest pair she could find in town – the soaring, magnificent chimneys of socialist propaganda instead interrupt the skyline "like the legs of a spider dead on its back". Pausing on her bicycle outside the rocket factory gate, her foot is a dragonfly skimming water.

Recalling her days as a young factory worker who dared to be different and became infatuated as much with the new ideas sweeping China as the string of lovers who espoused them, Zhang is a feisty narrator with a knack for fresh visual imagery.

Earthy dialogue brings to life the inter-

generational tensions in an overcrowded family home in Nanjing; the sniping and gossip of bored workers idling through the monotony of empty days in a state-owned enterprise; and the hopes of those who manage to break away from the government's iron rice bowl to swim in China's rising tide of private business.

It is not only the era that sets her story apart from the weepy women's canon of popular Western Chinese memoir. Unlike Xinran Xue's grim journalistic tales of female suffering under communism in *The Good Women Of China* or the stream of anguished family histories of the Cultural Revolution that followed Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, there are no victims to be pitied here, just strong and flawed female characters to be understood.

Zhang is merciless in her recollection of her teenage self-pity – crying in the stinky squat toilet for privacy – and a volatile temper that quickly bounces back to reason and humour.

Her spirited memoir has more in common with the intellectual road trips through 1980s China recalled by male authors such as Ma Jian (*Red Dust*). Except Zhang was stuck inside that factory gate. And while candid about her romances and



Romantic view with a feisty touch ... an image from the cover of *Socialism Is Great!*

free flowing in her use of China's most frequently mouthed obscenities, Zhang's memoir has more substance than the shocking hedonism of Wei Hui's explicitly modern *Shanghai Baby*.

Her well-considered observation of Chinese society and the political tides – the hangovers of its ancient superstitions and legends, the simultaneous doubt and hope that accompanied the democracy movement of 1989, and her questioning of the conformity that Zhang believes is cultivated in Chinese

from birth, provide the backbone of the wryly titled *Socialism Is Great!*

Life inside the greasy state-owned factory workshop may have changed for many urban Chinese in recent years as the economy and private enterprise roars, but the mindsets described by Zhang still linger in the background of contemporary Chinese society.

Her writing provides a window into the good humour, insecurities and perseverance that drive many Chinese of her generation today.