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Hand Grenades and Olympics
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We interviewed Lijia Zhang about her forthcoming book, Socialism is Great!, in early June. The piece below was originally published in The Guardian, where it received almost 400 comments before the paper closed comments for the story. Since then, it has been published in numerous other publications, including China Daily.

By Lijia Zhang

At my school, sports lessons included an exercise where we threw hand grenades (made from wood topped with metal to resemble the real thing) against a wall that stretched a red slogan with the reason for our militaristic “sport” – “exercise our bodies and protect our motherland.” We feared that China might be invaded one day by the American imperialists or Soviet revisionists. Indeed, the whole West seemed holding evil intent towards us. Living in a closed country, we had little idea about the outside world.

I went to school in Nanjing in the early 70s, when the revolutionary fever of the Cultural Revolution was calming down. A few years earlier, my father was banished to the countryside for criticizing the government. My grandfather, a small-time grain dealer, had committed suicide – as he worried his not-so-politically-correct background would land him in trouble. These were the darkest times for my family as well for our nation. Somehow the image of those dark days remain deeply imprinted on the Western mind, even though China has come a long way since then. Maybe the West is a little too keen to report the negative stories? Or perhaps, the West feels more comfortable hearing such stories?

That’s my impression, as a Chinese who has lived abroad and now writes for the Western media, based in Beijing. I had dreamt of becoming a journalist or a writer since hand grenade days. But my dream was shattered at the age of 16 when my mother dragged me from school to work at a state-owned missile factory. Only after I finally made my way to England did I dare to pursue my long-buried dream.

My journalistic career started with the Olympics. In 1993, on the night when the result of Olympic bidding was announced, I was at Tiananmen Square, reporting for the ABC (Australian) when the fountain went off – it must have been the biggest pre-mature ejaculation in history – as people thought China had won the bid. It was heart-breaking to interview the bitterly disappointed crowds. But China wasn’t really ready. The memory of the bloody crackdown in 1989 was still fresh.

I was also in Beijing eight years later when China did win the bid. In our neighbourhood, grannies spent the whole afternoon practice their dancing steps and their husband beating the drums and gongs. This time, they were not disappointed. The wild celebration, in the deafening noise of fire crackers, drums and gongs, laughter and ecstatic cries, went on the whole night. In a live interview with the BBC, I made the remarks: “In the ecstatic cries, I heard Chinese people’s longing for the recognition and respect from the world.”

I was just as happy as everyone else. Ever since the economic reforms, China has driven millions of people out of the poverty. An incredible feat in human history. As a child, I used to roast cicadas to eat to satisfy my craving for meat; now my 19-year-old nephew, a law university student in Nanjing, drives his own car. And people are now enjoying a great deal more personal freedom. As a rocket factory girl, I had to endure so many rules. I worked there for ten years without any promotion partly because of my naturally curly hair: my boss thought I wore a perm. Back then only those with bourgeois outlook would curl their hair. These days, young women curl their hair, shave off their hair or change the colours of their hair whenever they want.

In the past years, I have seen with my own eyes how the capital has been transformed. The state-of-art buildings, not just those Olympic buildings such as the ‘Bird Nest’ and the ‘Water Cubes’ – have
popped up like mushrooms after a spring rain. Right now, Beijing, having undergone a face-lift, has never looked so beautiful, clean and quiet.

Huge effort and sacrifice has been made. Polluting factories around Beijing were shut down; construction work has been halted and cars taken off the road. These may be necessary measures to ensure the air quality. Other measures seem excessive: beggars, the homeless and migrants without documentations were driven out; while petitioners – those who try to bring their grievance to the higher authority – have been stopped from entering the capital. Potential trouble-makers are being monitored or under house arrest. Excessive. That’s always the way the authority adapts when dealing with uncertainty.

Beijing’s Olympics will be a big success because the majority of population, proud as Chinese are, want it to be, not just because the government wants to use Olympic success to gain legitimacy. Xia Fengzhi, a 67-year-old retired worker and a volunteer, told me how happy and excited he is about the games. “I want foreigners to see what has China achieved. We were called the ‘sick men of Asia. Now we are strong and rich enough to hold such a major international event,” he said.

No doubt, there’ll be plenty of negative stories in the foreign media, criticizing China’s human rights abuses, the lack of media freedom; the treatment of petitioners and the over-tight securities. Some Chinese have no access to the reports; other do but decide to diminish them as grumbles from the anti-China forces. In a survey conducted by Pew Research Centre, China ranks the first among 24 nations in their optimism about their country’s future, buoyed by the fast economic growth and the promise of Olympics. There’s another factor – the timing, I believe. The survey was conducted this spring, just after Tibet unrest and in the middle of the troubled torch relay when we witnessed a surge of nationalism in response to what many Chinese regarded as the ‘anti-China feeling’ in the west and ‘biased’ Tibet reports.

Personally, I have no problem with negative stories. But I also think it is wrong for the West to stand in a self-appointed high-moral ground to accuse China of this and that, especially when some of the accusations are not true. To take Tibet unrest as an example, what happened in Lhasa, in my view, was far more complicated than “the Chinese government’s ruthless crackdown of Tibetan protest.” There was a peaceful protest but there was also a violent racial riot which I doubt would be tolerated in any country.

As a journalist, most of my stories criticize the government, which seems to have little idea about PR. Blessed with such domestic support and armed with the practiced skills in mass organization, the authority could have afforded to take a more relaxed approach. Why not make the Olympic games a really fun party – China’s big coming-out party? No need to cause so much interruption to the people’s lives. It would have been better to let the world to see China as it actual is.

And I can’t help but feeling there has been a missed opportunity on more important matters, too. Instead of trying to hide the problem, our leaders could have taken this as a good chance to address the real issues, cracking down on corruption, improving the rule of law, relaxing media control and opening the country further.

Don’t doubt our support for Beijing’s games. After all, the Olympics are meant to be the occasion to bring people with different views together. Secondly, it will provide a chance for China and the rest of the world to understand each other better. Although I can understand how China’s undemocratic political system and lack of transparency makes the West uneasy, especially compounded by the country’s rapid rise, I think much of the fear is generated by ignorance.

Today, the school kids enjoy far more sophisticated facilities than hand grenades. They know a lot more about the outside world, and so do their parents. I wonder if the Western kids and their parents know as much about China as we know about the West? If they did, would there be still the same fear? Maybe this Olympic games will bring us one step closer.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics