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## A Soulful Memoir of 1980s China

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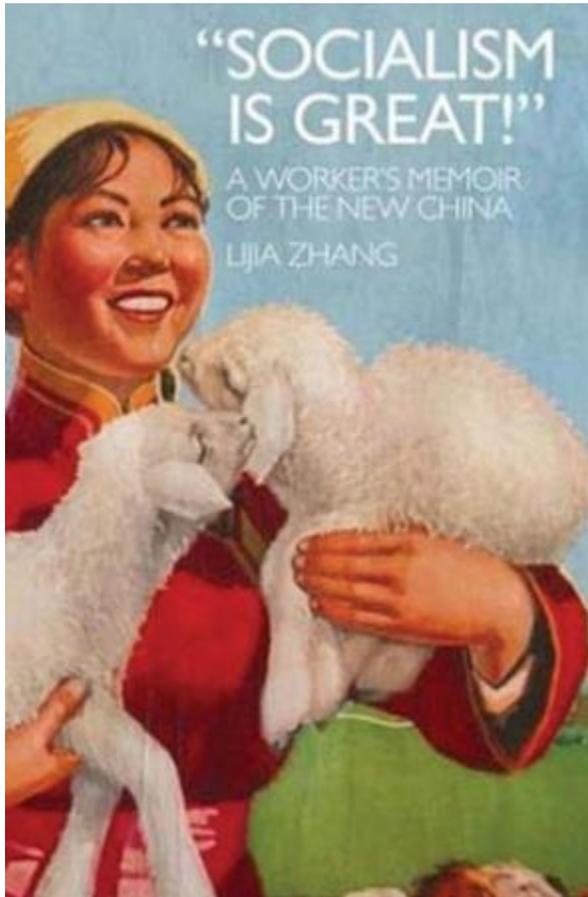
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## A Soulful Memoir of 1980s China

December 2, 2008 in [In Case You Missed It](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)



I think that no matter when I read it, I would have been impressed by Lijia Zhang's *Socialism is Great! A Worker's Memoir of the New China*. There is simply a lot to like about any book that is well crafted, unsparingly honest, and alternately poignant and amusing. And these adjectives all apply to Zhang's tale.

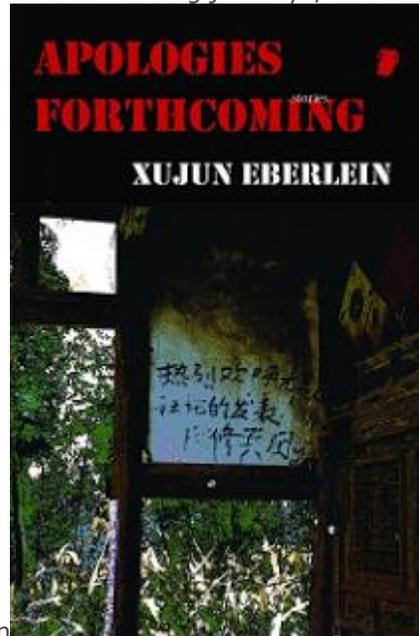
One sign of the care the author takes is that she neatly bookends the part of her life story she gives up with a pair of very different sorts of acts of rebellion. Readers first meet the narrator as she chafes at the idea of leaving school at seventeen to take-over her mother's job at a Nanjing missile factory—to no avail, as she has no option in the end but to accept this post and the "iron rice bowl" that comes with it. And one of the final images of Zhang we get is of her marching with other workers from her plant in a demonstration held to show support for the student-led occupation of Tiananmen Square.

In between, we learn about her early crushes. We are told about her first serious love affairs—made complicated, in part, by a China where young couples without access to private indoor spaces still met in parks, even though they could be arrested if discovered in compromising positions and unable to show a marriage license. We root for her as she struggles to gain respect from co-workers and continue her education (in English among other subjects) after her formal schooling is cut short. And we find out about the ways that her views of her mother and grandmother change over time.

I'd been looking forward to acquiring the book ever since hearing the author describe it when I happened to meet her in Shanghai a year-and-a-half ago. And reading [reviews of the book](#), perusing [interviews with Zhang](#), and checking out [excerpts from the memoir on the web](#) had increased my interest in getting hold of it. I'm glad, though, that I didn't end up with a copy until mid-way through my most recent trip to China, when the author passed one on to me at a Beijing dinner

we both attended. This is because it turned out to be just the right book to read on the plane ride home, for three different reasons. Though as I said, I would have liked the book whenever I read it, it was especially welcome to have in my hands just then.

The first reason the plane ride home was such a good time to read it has to do with its length. It proved just long enough for me to start it on the Shanghai to San Francisco leg of my journey, then finish it off during my layover in Northern California and short flight down to Orange County. I'm always grateful for reading material that can hold my interest on long journeys, and Zhang's memoir



did just that—a good reason for airport bookstores on either side of the Pacific to stock it for China-bound travelers and Americans returning from the PRC alike. I kept turning the pages not because I expected revelations about the Tiananmen protests or any of the other “big events” of the 1980s (it doesn't offer those), but rather because of the compelling window it offered onto how one strong-willed individual lived through a complex period, when new opportunities were opening up yet old constraints remained in place.

The second reason reading it on the trip home seemed so appropriate was because, on the way to China, one of the books that had helped me pass the time was Xujun Eberlein's *Apologies Forthcoming: Stories*. That collection of stories—many moving, all demonstrating Erberlein's knack for effective quick character sketches and skill at bringing natural and social settings to life via a minimum of carefully chosen details—deals with the Cultural Revolution and its immediate aftermath. Since Zhang started working at the missile factory just a bit later than that, reading the two books at opposite ends of my travels made them feel like a pair of linked texts.

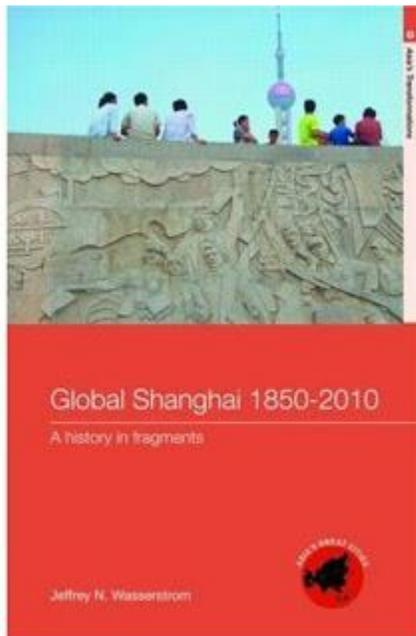
Then there's a final reason that the trip home seemed so fitting a time to read *Socialism is Great!* This has to do with the special meaning that the period covered in the book—what I sometimes refer to as China “Post-Mao/Pre-McDonald's” years—has for me. The era was distinctive in that it was so unclear where the PRC was heading; it was a time of far less ideological rigidity than what came before and much more egalitarianism than what would come later. And it was a time that I had on my mind when I flew out of the Pudong airport, as has often been the case when ending recent trips to China—despite or rather because of how much the country has changed since the days when Shanghai's tallest buildings dated from the early 1900s, when no Beijing resident had a cell phone, and bicycles vastly outnumbered cars in every Chinese metropolis.

That era between the Little Red Book and the Big Mac has a powerful meaning for me partly because it was then that I first spent time in China, living in Shanghai and traveling to various cities from August 1986 until July 1987 (while doing dissertation research) and then going back briefly in the fall of 1988 (to attend the conference from which the book *Shanghai Sojourners* emerged). There are always

things that remind me of that period when I go back, due to the old friends I see that I met back then, the foods I eat that I first ate during my initial trips to China, and so on. But I'm often struck by how few efforts to commemorate the 1980s can be found in public places.

It is not just that there are no monuments commemorating the Tiananmen protests or the June 4th Massacre, though that is part of what makes me feel that my first stay in China took place in its missing decade. Adding to this sense is that it is so easy now to run into self-conscious reminders of many other periods.

Confucian temples have been spruced up. In Shanghai, there are the insistent evocations of the city circa 1930, including bars and cafés that cater to and rev up nostalgia for those good old, bad old days. While some parts of the Maoist era are swept under the rug (the Great Leap Forward famine) or simply ignored (the early 1950s), there are theme eateries devoted to the Cultural Revolution. There are also still statues of the Great Helmsman on some campuses, the Chairman's portrait still looks down on Tiananmen Square, and Mao memorabilia is offered for sale in many locales—sometimes stocked in stalls right beside playing cards with the visages of Emperors and Empresses on the face cards and Olympic souvenirs that conjure up the pre-1949 and post-1989 eras. And, of course, displays devoted to the anti-imperialist, anti-Warlord, and anti-Nationalist struggles of the late 1800s and early-to-mid 1900s still fill museums and dot the urban landscape, with the frieze shown on the cover of my [new book](#) just one of the many to be found in Shanghai alone.



What the built environment (and, to be honest, the nostalgia-driven tourist industry, too) lacks for me are sites that invite us to revisit the 1980s. Yes, there are occasional buildings that date from that era that have been left relatively untouched by time (though you sometimes need to squint at them to keep a skyscraper out of view, especially in Shanghai). But there are no plaques, no special 1980s theme places to drink or dine, and no statues that serve to remind passersby of that era.

This means that, for me, the perfect thing to have in my hand as I fly home from China is a book that portrays those missing years. This time, Lijia Zhang's engaging memoir fit the bill perfectly.