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China Annals: Interview with Lijia Zhang

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Lijia Zhang, most recently the author of *Socialism is Great!*, is also a freelance journalist with a great sense of style and an awesome website. Recently she entertained Nicole Barnes of the China Beat with an interview about her work. Her latest book is auto-biographical and narrates the decade that she spent working in a munitions factory, one of Communist China’s notoriously boring state-owned enterprises. Hindsight is glorious; Zhang’s beautiful writing transforms even this drab existence into an entertaining page-turner.

**NB:** As a freelance journalist, you seem to have a lot of control over your topics. Your articles cover the most pressing social issues—child labor, kidnapped brides, and rural suicide rates—as well as the side effects of economic growth—migrating sand dunes, sexual liberation, and the “toilet revolution”.

What draws you to your topics?

**LZ:** First of all, let me stress that I don’t write for domestic publications, which means I don’t have to exercise self-censorship. I am a freelancer. I chose to write subjects that interest me. Coming from a lower social background, I like to focus on the ‘little people’s struggle, child labour, physically and emotionally displaced migrants and rural women. I also like to write stories that illustrate the changes the society is going through; all are very human stories.

**NB:** You write both journalistic articles and fiction so beautifully, in your non-native English. Do you ever find that the journalist and novelist in you struggle for dominance? How do you balance the two distinct styles in your professional life?

**LZ:** Very good question. When I was young, I dreamt about becoming a writer and a journalist— in fact, I didn’t quite understand the difference between the two. Now I do. To start with, it is too difficult to make a living from book writing, so I have to work as a journalist. Actually, I love being a journalist. People’s lives always fascinate me and I do meet a lot of interesting people through my work. Also, book writing is such a huge undertaking and a solitary practice. I enjoy the social aspect of journalistic work. Indeed, they can be complimentary to each other. I wrote a long feature on the issue of trafficking women— women being kidnapped and sold as wives to farmers— and I am pondering about making that the subject of my next book.
NB: Could you briefly describe the story line of your new memoir, “Socialism is Great!” to our blog readers?

[Blurb from the back cover of her book] A spirited memoir by a former Chinese factory worker who grew up in Nanjing, participated in the Tiananmen Square protest, and ended up an international journalist.

Lijia Zhang worked as a teenager in a factory producing missiles designed to reach North America, queuing every month to give evidence to the “period police” that she wasn’t pregnant. In the oppressive routine of guarded compound and political meetings, Zhang’s disillusionment with “The Glorious Cause” drove her to study English, which strengthened her intellectual independence – from bright, western style clothes to organizing the largest demonstration by Nanjing workers in support of Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989. By narrating the changes in her own life, Zhang chronicles the momentous shift in China’s economic policy: her factory, still an ICMB manufacturer, won the bid to cast a giant bronze Buddha as the country went crazy for profit. Written in English, “Socialism Is Great!” is a testament to Zhang’s personal triumphs over the controlled existence that was supposed to be her destiny.

NB: Was writing your memoir cathartic in any way, or was it difficult to bring up the past?

LZ: Writing has always been my way to make sense of my life. And I always find it very therapeutic. Yes, I would say that writing this memoir was cathartic.

NB: Is there a silver lining to the cloud of a decade spent in a state-owned munitions factory—meaning, do you feel that you learned something from that experience that you may not have learned elsewhere?

LZ: Trapped for a decade at a factory was a bit too long. Yet, there’s always a silver lining: it toughened me up. I guess it turned me into a fighter since for every little step I’ve made in my life, I had to fight for it.

NB: As a young adult, you dreamed of being a writer. Now that you are one, what is the best part about fulfilling this dream? Is there any part of your job that you find unsavory or difficult?

LZ: For me, there’s something deeply satisfying and intensely pleasurable about writing. The best part is when people – especially those who are not my personal friends – tell me how much they love my work. I have just returned from a very successful book tour in the US where I enjoyed an enthusiastic response to my book and incredible hospitality from strangers. It was a morally uplifting experience.

NB: From my reading, it appears that Westernization occupies a rather dominant place in your work. Do you have the same impression? How do you feel about Westernization in China?

LZ: In this book, I also tried to explore the impact of western culture. China was isolated for so long. Once it opened up, I, like many young people, enthusiastically embraced western culture. I loved to wear bright western clothes. Now, I prefer to wear stylish Chinese-style clothes. In some ways, the growing westernization in China is part of globalization, but as China is growing stronger and more assertive, people are picking and choosing the best from both cultures.

NB: You clearly write a lot for English-language audiences. Do you also publish work in Chinese?

LZ: China’s fast growing economy and its rising position in the world demand understanding. I feel there’s need for people like me who have the inside into the culture and who are also able to communicate with those on the outside. That’s how I see the role I can play best. I do write occasionally for Chinese publications.