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



Synopsis

With a great charm and spirit, "Socialism Is Great!" recounts Lijia Zhang's rebellious journey from disillusioned factory worker to organizer in support of the Tiananmen Square demonstrators, to eventually become the writer and journalist she was always determined to be. Her memoir is like a brilliant miniature illuminating the sweeping historical forces at work in China after the Cultural Revolution as the country moved from one of stark repression to a vibrant capitalist economy.

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Customer Reviews

...if you want to begin to understand China today, then invest the time to read this intimate and revealing look at growing up in China in the 70s and 80s. Lijia Zhang illuminates the complexities of growing up in China. Bound by the Cultural Revolution early in the book, and the early market and political reforms in the late 1980s, Zhang opens the curtain on the family and work life stories of largely average Chinese, not connected to party power or even the middling advantages of

promotion into the cadre in state enterprises. Along the way, she provides funny and sad commentary on traditional aspects of Chinese culture that most Westerners probably are not acquainted with; speaking in metaphors, the tendency to differentiate people with common surnames with nicknames (often NOT flattering) based on their physical traits), the struggle for privacy and the longstanding divide between urban and rural dwellers that Maoism did not relieve. As dismissive as she is of the value of her state-run factory work, she was working in relatively prestigious one; the intercontinental ballistic missiles built at her factory certainly changed strategic equations for both the United States and the Soviet Union in the early 80s. I discovered this book through serendipity. My daughter needed it for school, and we ended up with two copies. Zhang and I have some intersections in our personal stories. I began studying Chinese at about the same time she began learning English; more than 30 years later, it's reassuring to know that the Maoist slogans I struggled to translate were as inscrutable to somebody in China as they were to us westerners. The successful launch of a product built in her Nanjing factory --which flew from western China to the south Pacific-- had a major influence on my early professional career after completing my Chinese studies. The last half of this book offers glimpses of the beginnings of China's entrepreneurial environment that would turn into the manufacturing and economic force it has become. I remember clearly when the first "Made in China" markings appeared on things I had bought. They seemed rare and exotic then, even though they were mostly on goods that were decidedly non-durable. How far China, the China that Lijia Zhang grew up in and Zhang herself have traveled. If you hope to ever understand China or the Chinese, you'll have to take on the task in small chunks. Zhang's contemporaries are the ones who will guide China into what it becomes next; reading her book can help you understand where they came from. In combination with her intensely personal story, it's an amazing piece of reading.

What if Princess Diana had written an autobiography that ended "...and then I married this guy named Charlie, but it didn't work out. He was hung up on an old girlfriend."? That's the feeling I had reading the last chapter of "Socialism is Great", an otherwise informative, readable and enjoyable story of a young woman growing up in Nanjing in the 70's and 80's. This was the first biography I had read of someone growing up in the PRC, and the author does a great job of conveying the political and the personal, and how the political climate affects personal relationships. The book begins with the end of her formal schooldays, when the author is to take over her mother's job at a missile factory in Nanjing. It traces her family through the terrors of the Cultural Revolution to the trials and frustration of capitalism without democracy. It traces her own struggle between balancing

the needs of family with the needs of self, and her own struggle to get ahead in a society that is egalitarian in slogans only. Throughout her life, the author displays tremendous resilience and strength, as well as honesty in assessing her successes and failures. Up until the last chapter. I don't want to give away the book, but the last chapter leaves HUGE questions unanswered. It also reads like it was rushed, a hurried postscript when it was in fact the climax of the story. Would I recommend the book? Yes. I just wish the author would have been a little more forthcoming at the end of the book.

This is the author's memoir from her young adult years in the 1980s. Most of the book takes place after Zhang's mother forced her to leave high school and take over her old job at an arms factory. Zhang is surrounded by a job that lacks luster, coworkers more interested in napping than working, and an arguing family. Through it all, Zhang finds constant comfort in studying and reading. Having just finished several memoirs that were set during periods of political upheaval, I was expecting a little more conflict in this book. Compared to those memoirs, Zhang's life is peaches and cream. She goes through boyfriends and interests much like any young person does. She makes several discoveries about herself, such as developing a love of poetry. This is the book. There are relatively few hardships and relatively little conflict. I usually take notes when I read but found this narrative so dry that I stopped. Nevertheless, Zhang's use of the language shines. She makes constant analogies and uses wonderful proverbs to illustrate how and why people act. These analogies show just how artistic ornamental language can be. Zhang's ability to use the language rivals the best modern authors from any country.

I loved Zhang's use of Chinese words to accompany her descriptions and phrases. I found the literal (and often peculiar) translations of conversations from Chinese to English endearing and amusing. Her descriptions give the reader such rich visuals of her family members, coworkers, friends, and lovers. I was impressed with her English and that she used American colloquialisms in appropriate contexts. You can really feel Zhang's emotions as she transitions from being a 'typical obedient Chinese girl' to a rebellious individualistic member of China's society. Whether you enjoy memoirs, or stories of China (or both in my case!); this book provides a perfect mix of Chinese history and an author's personal growth. ps: I finished this book in 2 days! I couldn't put it down! :)

great

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