

May 2015

As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with Lijia Zhang, whose life story reflects the phenomenal changes which have occurred in China. Lijia wrote a spirited memoir as a former Chinese factory worker who grew up in Nanjing, participated in the Tiananmen Square protests and ended up as an international journalist. Today, she is a successful writer and columnist for international newspapers.



**AV:** Hello and welcome to another in the series of Cafe Insights. I am Andrew vine, CEO of The Insight Bureau and today I am in conversation with Lijia Zhang, from Beijing. How are you?

**LZ:** Very well! Enjoying the fresh air of Singapore when Beijing is being attacked by sandstorms!

**AV:** Oh I heard! Well, I'm delighted to have you in town, it's a great treat. I have to confess that I find it slightly difficult to know exactly how to introduce you. You are a very well known international writer in the media, a commentator on China and a best-selling author. Tell us a little bit more about what you do?

**LZ:** What I do? Yes, as you said I'm based in Beijing, I'm a writer, social commentator, a columnist, and a public speaker, I do a few lectures.

**AV:** But people would be very surprised, I think, to learn that when you started out as a teenage girl turning into adulthood, you were a rocket factory girl, in Nanjing!

**LZ:** Yes, I started when I was 16; my mother just dragged me out of school so I worked at the rocket factory for 10 years. So, you know, I was a former-rocket-factory-girl-turned-writer! I bet you don't meet one of those every day!

**AV:** I don't indeed! Exactly, and it's quite a journey from there to today as an international journalist writing in some of the best publications in the world, being interviewed on BBC and CNN and the likes. And indeed you wrote a book -- and this is what you're most famous for of course -- "*Socialism is Great*". Tell us why you wrote that book and what it really tells us.

**LZ:** The book called "*Socialism is Great*" is actually a popular revolutionary song, the title actually comes from the publisher who thought it was very interesting. It's not about socialism, it's all about me, about my life working at the factory in the 80's. I wrote an article about my experience. Actually after talking about this with a writer called Peter Hessler, and after he learnt I worked at a rocket factory for 10 years, he was very surprised. He said, why don't you write about your experience? And many people say "Wow this is so interesting". I just realised that there are so few books back in the 80's, yet the 80's was the most fascinating era in contemporary China, because that was the time Deng Xiaoping introduced economic reforms which has slowly transformed China. It's the time really people came to terms with what happened -- the sea changes that took place -- and it's the time people began to dream the impossible. I mean, I was a factory worker, I decided to teach myself English and become a Writer. Anyway, so that was a really fascinating era and in many ways that was the time China became what it is today.

**AV:** It's interesting because the book, on the face of it, is your story, but at the same time it's very much about China's incredible development as well.

**LZ:** I think, I guess a personal story always brings history alive. I think of my own personal journey also very much mirrors what happened in China; the social transformation started by the introduction of Deng Xiaoping's reforms of opening-up policy. Yes, I remember those things changing just so dramatically, one journalist described how in the 80's how China changed from a Black/White photo to a coloured one, and another journalist famously joked about it after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms Chinese women suddenly got breasts! [Laughter] -- because before that everyone was wearing Chairman Mao's lumpy jackets and women started wearing more stylish clothes and all that.

**AV:** I know that you write a lot about women actually in society, of course in China, China's got a record of actually engaging women in the economy much more than many other nations have done. Yet there's still a lot to talk about in terms of role of women in society.

**LZ:** Yes absolutely and actually just a few months ago, I was invited to give a conference speech about the changing role of Chinese women, told this through the story of my family. My grandmother was a prostitute-turned-concubine, and my mother was a factory hand all her life, and I was a rocket factory girl-turned-writer. I think the Chinese Communist party has done a lot for women. Chairman Mao famously said, "women can hold up half the sky". That statement is as elusive as the sky itself, but the Chinese Communist has done a lot, you know; abolished all the feudal practice, concubines, forced marriage... Before women were not allowed to divorce, for example. Marxist authorities believed the Marxist theory that to liberate women, women must take part in production. Yes, so that's why in China now a high percentage of women do work. But the economic opening-up of reforms also brought setbacks. For example, the income gap is widening, the female employment is going down, prostitution is going up, women they are finding much harder finding employment. Before, no matter if you were a girl or boy, you were assigned a job by the government. I think government retreated from a lot of its responsibility to the market.

**AV:** Now, you also comment a lot about how China is continuing to develop. I think, from the outside at least, there are many worries about China. There's a worry about China's slowdown, whether that is going to cause social disharmony and tension in the country, even to the extent that people are worried that China's going to fall apart, that China is too big to manage by the Communist Party.

**LZ:** Yes, absolutely. I think you have raised a very interesting question. Just recently this very famous Sinologist, Professor David Shambaugh, wrote a big opinion piece about China's upcoming cracking up, particularly predicting Chinese Communist is going to collapse. But personally I don't think it's going to happen. I think the Chinese Communist Party has proven to be more adaptable and more resilient than many people predicted. For example, we talk about discontentment and I think there *is* lot of discontentment. Actually a lot of protests are happening every day but these kinds of protests, they are mostly economic driven. For example workers demanding higher pay, farmers' land being taken away, they haven't been compensated properly and they try to protest. So they are economic driven, not politically driven and they are also local.

**AV:** And many a things you talk about are actually cultural changes, the rise of-- freedom of expression and religion, a rebirth of Confucius values in China

**LZ:** Hmm, yes, I recently actually wrote a piece about revival of Confucian values which is quite interesting. Many people thought this trend was manipulated by the government, which I don't. In the past 15 years, with China's fast economic growth and rising position in the world, people were asking themselves the big question, 'Who are the Chinese?'. What is our cultural value? I think Communism kind of collapsed. Very people really believe in Communism. But there is no replacement, and yet throughout the imperial dynasty Confucianism has been the dominating ideology. Now, it has kind of returned as a kind of important part of culture and national identity. And

I think, in some ways, the government is making use of that situation. For example, Confucius talks about respecting hierarchy, respecting authority, so they are making use of that in some ways.

**AV:** When people look at China today and just how fast it's growing, and the kind of slightly more assertive China in the world, do you think China is a country that we should be fearing?

**LZ:** I can understand why there is such a fear about China, and I think China does give a lot of reason for people to get worried. There's no democracy, there's lack of transparency, China has poor human rights and China has indeed become more assertive on the international stage, the dealing with for example, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. But I think some of the fear is generated by ignorance and what I am trying to do is to try to help people understand where China is coming from, what's happening now, where is China going. Once you have better understanding of China, then there will be less fear. Definitely there will be more empathy

**AV:** Now Lijia you just said a little while ago that there is a rise in prostitution in China, you said your grandmother was a concubine.

**LZ:** Yes, yes.

**AV:** Now this is the theme of your brand new enterprise, a labour of love, a novel.

**LZ:** Yes it is labour of love indeed! Yes I just completed my first novel called '*Lotus*', it's a book about prostitution. I have been fascinated by the subject of prostitution ever since I learnt that my own grandmother was actually a working girl. I only learnt that shortly before she passed away. Anyway, my mother told me her story, she became an orphan and she was sold into prostitution and she met my grandfather on the job! Yes and then in 1949 when communist took over in power, men were only allowed one wife and my grandfather decided to stay with my grandmother, his concubine. Coming from a journalistic background, prostitution is actually, for me, it's only a window to see the tensions brought about by the reform. As you probably know that the vast majority of the working girls in China are migrant workers, originally from rural China, and they are poorly educated, unskilled and ill-prepared for city life. And because of the Hokou system, the job options are very limited. So anyway, I'm just fascinated by the prostitution and wondered how the working girls cope with daily life. So anyway, that's how it inspired my book

**AV:** And it's based on the real life story of what is happening in Shenzhen.

**LZ:** [Laughter] It's a pure work of fiction. I did lots of research, but it's not another memoir!

**AV:** No I didn't think it was for a second! [laughter]

**LZ:** Yes I did a lot of research, I met a friend who was a prostitute. I worked even for an NGO dedicated to helping female sex workers. Lots of little details are real but the story itself - the plot - is all fabrication, not based on my own life. [laughter]

**AV:** Well fascinating! Look I'd love to speak to you for hours like this but I think I'll conclude by just saying how wonderful it is to meet you here in Singapore

**LZ:** A pleasure

**AV:** I realise that there's quite a lot you have to offer in terms of helping to put the human face on China's development when people would need to understand that better, and you have a very fascinating and inspiring story of your own to tell! Lijia, thank you very much for sparing the time. I hope we see you again very soon.

**LZ:** My pleasure, thank you

<http://www.insightbureau.com/LijiaZhang.html>