



PODCAST

Ep. 18: Lijia Zhang on Women’s Stories

The memoirist and novelist talks us through her grandmother's and mother's stories, as well as her own, and discusses how the status of women has changed in China through the decades.

ALEC ASH — MARCH 4, 2025

MEMOIR



The stories that span generations in China tell much of the changes the country has been through, personalizing the sweep of history in which individual voices and family histories can be lost. Often, it’s the voices of women that are lost the most easily, so in the run up to International Women’s Day — a widely celebrated holiday in mainland China — we’re looking back to bring a few to the fore.

Our guest this month is Lijia Zhang, a Chinese-British writer and public speaker whose recent focus is women’s histories. Born in Nanjing, she worked in a rocket factory as a teen, and participated in the 1989 protests before leaving to work as a news assistant in Beijing and elsewhere, eventually immigrating to England and writing books. Her 2008 memoir [Socialism Is Great!](#) tells not just her story but that of her mother and grandmother before her, while her 2016 novel [Lotus](#) is inspired by her grandmother. She joins us to talk about those books, and her new work about women’s lives in China, as well as how these stories have changed through the decades:



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China Books Podcast

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Guest



Lijia Zhang is a writer, social commentator and public speaker. Her articles have appeared in *The Guardian*, *The South China Morning Post*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*. She is author of the memoir [*Socialism Is Great!*](#) (2008) about her journey from factory worker to writer, and the novel [*Lotus*](#) (2017), following a prostitute's life in China. Zhang is a regular speaker on the BBC, Channel 4, CNN and NPR. She divides her time between London and Beijing.

“Chairman Mao’s idea of gender equality was denying the physical difference between men and women. ... Gender equality in those days was often looked at through class struggle.”

Transcript

ALEC ASH: Zhang Lijia, welcome to the *China Books Podcast*.

LIJIA ZHANG: Thank you for having me.

You’ve written a memoir and a novel and we’re going to talk about those and also new projects in the works. But I wanted to start chronologically with your family history so that readers can get to know you a little bit more first. You have such a gripping family and personal story, especially of the female family members across three generations of the Zhang family, which is at the heart of much of your writing. Could we start with your grandmother, who you just called “Nai” in your memoir, who was what they called a “flower girl” in the 1930s. Could you tell us who she was, her story, and also how you came to learn about that story on her deathbed?

My grandmother was a very special person. So we called her Nai, which means paternal grandmother. But, our paternal grandmother, we were not very close to her, so we call her Nai, as a kind of way to show affection. She was a really special person. She brought us up. As I was growing up, my father worked in another city and my mother had a full time job, so we were brought up. Like many Chinese families, we were brought up by grandparents. So, she was the one who brought us up. She was the one who made breakfast and braided my hair and cooked for us and was a very very special person. She suffered so much in her life, and she went through — you know, China, contemporary China was a very turbulent time — so she witnessed the rape of Nanjing.

She was born in 1915, was it?

1914. And then she, you know, the political trouble... Shortly before her death, I discovered a long kept family history, secret: my grandmother in her youth, was a “flower girl,” a courtesan. I was shocked and I didn’t expect the dearest person to me, my life was a sex worker. My mother explained her life story. My grandmother was born in a small town and when she was six or seven years old, she lost her parents to famine. Then she was adopted by her aunt’s family, who treated her like a slave. When she blossomed into, a beautiful young woman at 14, the aunt’s husband just sold her to a brothel. So she worked there for 10 years in, from what I understood, a mid-range brothel called *Chunxianglou* (春香楼), kind of “Pavilion of Spring Fragrance.” There she met my grandfather. That was another surprise. You don’t associate your grandmother with a prostitute or your grandfather with a john. That was the case. My grandfather was very smitten with her, so he bailed her out and installed my grandmother as his concubine. That’s in the olden days. That was the way for men to show

their power and prestige was to keep a concubine.

Only after she had given birth to her daughter, she requested to leave the family house and move to Nanjing. When she was living with his family, the concubine position was very low and she was constantly bullied by my grandpa's wife and their children. Anyway, she established her life in Nanjing. Then in 1949, when the Chinese communists took power, the men were ordered to have one wife. So my grandpa decided to stay with his sweet-natured concubine instead of his wife. So perhaps for that reason alone, my grandma loved Chairman Mao.

But, having said that, there was also a reason that I do think that the Chinese Communist Party did a lot for women. In 1950, shortly after China established the People's Republic of China, the government introduced the Marriage Law, a wonderful, at least at that time, a very forward-thinking policy like: banning arranged child marriage, banning concubines, and granting women the equal rights to education, to jobs, and of course, only one wife.

And also she learned my grandmother was illiterate, and the government had this anti-illiteracy campaign. They organized classes. My grandmother learned to write her own name. Before she was only known as Huang Yangsi, which means "The woman from the Zhang family married to her husband, Huang." So she didn't even have her own name. But then she learned to write her own name. The government encouraged women to have their own name. Her name was Yang Huizhen. So she learned to write her characters.

So it was the early days of communist China, which helped, in fact, stamp out those pre-1949...

... feudal practices of, you know, child arranged marriage and concubine keeping.

Got it. So tell us next about your mother, who sort of Encapsulates the next generation and the next era because she grew up with the People's Republic of China. She was 12, I think.

Yes. So my mother was, 12 years old when the Chinese Communist Party took over in 1949. And like many progressive young people, she was very happy about this dramatic social transformation. And, uh, when she finished schooling at 16 and she waited for nearly one year, in those days, the government assigned jobs. So she was, given, assigned a job working at a state owned enterprise. And she, she was very, very grateful. in those days, getting a job with a state owned enterprise, which means cradle to grave social welfare.

This is the iron rice bowl.

Yes. The iron rice bowl, you will never lose job. So my mother worked at the factory more or less, you know, for the rest of her life. And she did basically one type of job. And in the beginning she did some, she worked as a tanner and then she got this job doing acid pickling, just dumping the machines in a tank full of chemicals to clean the surface.

So this was the factory she worked in, also a young age, right?

From when she was from 17 till when she retired, she had early retirement when she was 44.

And this is a factory that made intercontinental missiles?

Among other products, yes. She worked there, I mean her job was very taxing and it was really a man's job, but Chairman Mao's idea of gender equality was denying the physical difference between men and women. I'm sure you know that, during that time. The model women Well, the Iron Maidens of Dazhai, *Dazhai Tieguniang*. So these women, they, they look like men, they dress like men, they could carry as much as night soil as men.

And of course there was the famous phrase, *funv nengding banbian tian* (妇女能顶半边天).

Women can hold up half the sky. I think that statement was as elusive as the sky itself. You know, like just take the factory, the same factory I also worked for.

So if you're higher up, you go, most bosses, they're men. And the higher up you go, even women, they managed to get into the, cadre, the senior management position, hey were given jobs like, in charge of family planning, looking after *gong hui*, labor union, the positions were often less important compared to men.

So there were a lot of women given ostensible equality at the lower rungs, Rosie the riveter style, but there hasn't been a single woman in the standing committee of the Politburo.

Yes.

But your mother still had a lot more independence than your grandmother. How do you understand change in women's status from your grandmother's to your mother's era?

Yeah, I think my mother, compared to her own mother, her life was better. And I think in the early days so many women, young people like my mother, they were very enthusiastic about Chinese Communist Party and the new China. Everybody was very patriotic. They were hoping to try their best and to help the construction to build a new China. She had made her own living and her life, generally speaking, was much, much better off compared to her own mother.

I should say that women started to trickle into the labor force in the beginning of the 20th century, and then the Chinese government kind of accelerated that process because the Chinese Communist Party believed that only through taking part in production could women achieve equality, and in a sense, integration. But also because the Chinese government encouraged women to work. There was a practical need, China was in a mess in 1949, so they needed women to take part. Gender equality in those days was often looked at through class struggle.

A socialist view of gender equality. So that brings us to you, Lijia, the third generation of a family, and you grew up in the next era, in the 80s, post cultural revolution. Tell us a little bit about how you got from the same factory to being a journalist and a writer of books and leaving China in the end.

Yeah, that's a long story. And anyway, so I still, compared to my mother and my grandmother, I think I fared the best because I was born at the right time. But that didn't feel like in the beginning. So I, I grew up. In a residential compound, belonged to the factory my mother worked for all her life. This rocket factory, missile factory.

In Nanjing.

In the outskirts of Nanjing. The factory took care of workers. So they built a factory, residential buildings for us. We had a tiny place, but it was a modern building. And I did well at school. I dreamed of going to university and then become a writer and journalist ever since my teacher began to read my writing as a good example to show other students. And I won a competition in the provincial, city level, provincial level writing competition, so I wanted to go to university and become a journalist and writer. At that time I didn't quite understand the difference between a journalist and writer, as I do now.

But anyway, my dream was shattered when I was 16. I was taken out of school. I was 16 but very much like a child and was treated like a child. So, my mother decided to take advantage, there was a policy.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. After two years, Deng Xiaoping introduced reform and opening up. But that reform and opening up took a few years for the effect to kick in. So by 1980, the economic situation was quite dire in China. There was a high unemployment rate. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao sent off Red Guards to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants.

And then, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, those young people returned to the city. There were no jobs. So the government introduced a temporary policy called *di zhi*, which means that if parents retired early, one of their children could take over their job. So my mother decided it was too good an opportunity to waste.

I guess my mother being uneducated, she never appreciated the benefit of education. She thought that the best thing a mother could do was to secure a job for her daughter, especially a job like a prestigious state-owned factory like my factory. So she retired early and she found another job. So I started work. And because I didn't find the job, I had to hand over all my salary to my mother. My first year's salary was 30 *yuan* and *wumao* [50 cents]. So I had to hand over to mum all but the 50 cents.

Oh, you kept the *wumao*?

Wumao, yes.

So you're the *wumaodang* [[fifty cent party](#), online slang for Chinese government -paid internet trolls].

Just me, not the Party. So I could buy some books, I always loved books.

So, for your mother, she didn't see education as important in uplifting women?

No, no. Now, if any of my daughters wants to do a master's, I said, "Yes, I will pay."

So you were pulled out of school in 1980 to work in this factory. How did you get from there to here?

That's a long, slow process. So I would start working at the factory. The factory was like a mini communist state. The factory provided lots of things. For example, accommodation was provided for. It was almost — we had to pay a tiny bit of rent but — almost free. The factory provided lots of things, accommodation, dining halls, shower houses, libraries but also controlled our life. The first day we entered the factory, we were given lectures not to do this, not to do that, no high heels. They were very strict at that time. You cannot, your trousers cannot be too tight, cannot be *labaku* [喇叭裤, bell-bottoms], trousers with flare. The trousers with flares that's the symbol of capitalists. So, within three years of entering the factory, you're not allowed to date. And there's just so many rules, and I hated my life there. In China, it began to change. I felt I was left behind.

So, I decided to get out of the factory and the route was to teach myself English. Today, as you know, lots of young Chinese people speak excellent English and there are so many devices and there are so many pirated copies of the latest Hollywood movies. At that time, it was very difficult. We didn't even have a radio, the first step was I borrowed the radio from my cousin. I followed the *Xu Guozhang Yingyu* (许国璋英语). It was really boring. It was called the "Yellow Textbook."

I hope they weren't too "yellow" [a euphemism for pornographic in Chinese].

No, not yellow, dry political stuff. The first sentence we learned was something like, "Language is a class struggle." It was very, very boring. So I moved on to study New Concept English. And New Concept, indeed, that was an English textbook. And I was just fascinated by it. Once I started learning English, I became fascinated by this language system so different from our own Chinese character.

I became obsessed, and I signed up to study teach yourself english. I wanted to learn systematically. Then on Sunday afternoons, I would cycle all the way to the city center in Nanjing called Gulou, Drum Tower. There was an English corner. People like me, very keen to learn English, will get together. We always spoke so loudly, as if the sheer volume could compensate for the lack of fluency. If we saw a foreigner pass by, we will grab him or her and ask this foreigner lots of inappropriate questions: Where you from? How much money you earn? You know that, you know. Are you married? How many children do you have? How much money you earn?

Now, don't worry, I won't ask you such personal questions.

I have a friend who used to wear a t-shirt with the answers to those questions on them, just to save some time.

You know, but anyway, we were just so keen to learn. Of course, my English sounded quite different. Shall I give you an example of what my English?

Sure.

Merry *Ke-li-su-mu-si an-de ha-pi nü-yi-er*. What did I say?

Happy New Year?

Ha-pi nü-yi-er!

And to you too. And so it was that, it was learning English, which was your Open Sesame, which eventually led to you studying in England and becoming a journalist assistant and then writing books.

And yes, I mean, looking back, learning English has really effectively changed my life because what I learned was not just the ABCs, but the whole cultural package. And at that time, I met quite a few interesting friends from the English corner because people are not [just] interested in English, but also interested in what's happening beyond China. We're talking about America, the separation of power, and would that democracy answer for China? I remember I met people studying at Nanjing University studying master degrees. At that time there were lots of lectures about introducing the idea. In 80s, and for me and many of my friends, it was the most exciting time.

For the first time, books like Nietzsche's God is Dead, and Freudian works like this being translated into English for the first time. We were talking about this and, after my English improved, I began to listen to BBC and VOA, which broadcast news very different from my propaganda.

And it would become very political, I know, compared to today's young Chinese people. Because there was no environment at that time, we were just so immensely interested in politics, and we'd talk about politics all the time. In 1989, the unprecedented pro-democracy movement took place in China that started in Tiananmen, led by students, but it grew to be a nationwide movement.

I was still in China and I followed the event, listened to VOA, listened to BBC. Every day I went to the — in Nanjing there was a square called Drum Tower Square. It was our equivalent of Tiananmen Square. So we went there and listened to the debate. So just a few days before the crackdown on June 4th, I organized a pro-democracy protest to support the students in Tiananmen.

This is the story that you write about in your memoir *Socialism is Great*.

Yes. I have to say that's not, uh... the title comes from the publisher. I have no credit for it. That's *Socialism is Great!*

Exclamation mark.

Yeah, exclamation mark and a quotation mark. That "Socialism is Great!" is actually, a title of a popular revolutionary song, "[Socialism is Good!](#)" (社会主义好!). Cui Jian turned it into [rock-and-roll](#) [song]: "*Shehuizhuyi hao!!!*" [Ed. note: it was actually Zhang Chu.]

So we needed the explanation mark.

I can send you the link and you can listen to it.

Please do. So that book came out in 2008. It was one of the first China books I read because that was the year I moved to China.

Really? Wow. I'm flattered.

In the book, it tells the stories of the 80s. From 1980, when you were pulled out of school to work in a factory to 1989 and it ends with you being caught by the authorities after that for participating in those protests and in between it talks about other facets of the 1980s...

... My love life.

Yes, indeed. The strike hard campaign, *getihu* (个体户), private enterprise, all of these things. You write in the epilogue to the book: "Although the market [of China books] is flooded with China memoirs, they are mostly set during the Cultural Revolution or before but few are from the 1980s, when China began to recover from its traumatic past and to initiate changes. It was the time China became what it is today."

I want to ask you about that and let's begin with that line about the Cultural Revolution memoirs, which is a genre in itself — scar literature in China. Jung Chang wrote one of the best selling Cultural Revolution memoirs, *Wild Swans*, which is also a tale of three female generations of a family history. Can you tell us, did you read these books as a child? As an adult? What were your favorites among them? And what purpose did you see those early memoirs as serving?

I had the pleasure of meeting Jung Chang several times, and we had actually shared a stage several times as well, and I think she did a really fantastic job. *White Swans*, probably is one of the most successful non-fiction books ever. She's a good storyteller and, also he come out in the beginning of the 90s. At that time, China was developing very rapidly, was rising in the world. Yet, there are not many human books. By then there were also quite a few books about China, political books. *Alive in the Bitter Sea*, for example, a New York Times journalist wrote the book.

Or your own, *China Remembers*.

But that's a bit later. There are not many human stories. I think that book offered that kind of a really: "What happened? How people live their life under Chairman Mao's leadership?" I think that book really increased China's profile.

And is that what you wanted to do then for the 1980s — to humanize the story of that very different period of transition?

Yes. I think the huge, massive success of *Wild Swans* led to a string of China-related memoirs like *Life and Death in Shanghai*, *Falling Leaves* and quite a few of those kind what is called “miserable lit” or something and I want to write a book on my own story.

I think the 80s, for me and many of my friends, 80s was the most fascinating era in contemporary China. That was the time Deng Xiaoping introduced the reform and opening up, which really transformed China way beyond the economic field. And that was the time when Chinese people began to dream the impossible.

When I started to learn English people laughed at me. They called me “a toad who once dreamed to eat swan’s meat.” Anyway, so the 80s was the time China began to change. Apart from miserable literature, there was *shanghen wenxue* (伤痕文学), scar literature.

There were also people who began to experiment. For example, Liu Sola wrote a few very interesting, very avant garde-style stories. There was no obvious storyline, for example — a stream of conscience, this concept, was introduced.

And also contemporary art started in the 80s. People began to reinterpret history. There was a painting of Chairman Mao with young woman. The arts scene started in the 80s. And also women began to unbutton chairman Mao’s straight jacket, start to put on makeup, start to wear stylish clothes and, I think one, Western journalist famously joked, half-joked: “After Deng Xiaoping introduced reform and opening up, Chinese women suddenly got breasts.” Because before everybody was wearing Chairman Mao’s grey, blue, lumpy jacket. So yes, I found the 80s was the most exciting time in contemporary China.

I feel very lucky that my book enjoyed modest success. And it’s a classic case, probably, to tell a big story of a country in transition through personal story.

You use, as your epigraph, the image of the frog in the well, *jingdizhiwa* (井底之蛙), which thinks that its well and the little circle of sky it can see is the whole world. Is that what you feel China as a whole was like coming out of that well?

Yes, yes, exactly. The reform and opening up ended China’s self imposed isolation. So yes, in a way, China was a frog in a well, in a word.

In the book you write so well about personal awakens as well as political, as you mentioned. There’s a lovely turn of phrase you use: “The communist cage has grown large enough for them to ignore its limits.” Right? So the length of your hair and the width of your trousers, as you said, are all personal choice now but also marriage and sex. Whereas previously you needed the permission from your Danwei, your work unit, to get married, and everything that comes with it. In your book, you also do write about those personal awakenings. As you brought it up, so I wanted to ask, how did you take the decision to include those very personal things in the text?

I guess, I think, I want to be honest and be authentic. Being authentic means being vulnerable. and I think it’s very important that you are honest with yourself, including those details. Besides the fact that, I think people would like to read about this experience.

You mentioned how, in the 80s, there was another form of women’s liberation. Where is that today? Your book reminds me of another memoir by a young Chinese woman, Karoline Kan.

Yes, she’s wonderful.

Yes. *Under Red Skies*, which was published in 2019, which is also a family history, but from the next generation along. How do you see the experience of Chinese women different in today’s young generation?

I think today’s young Chinese woman like Karoline — of course, she’s a particularly outstanding, brilliant writer — I think the reform opening up has indeed provided the Chinese people, and women included, unprecedented opportunity. So they are even luckier than we are, I would like to think.

You’ve also written a novel in 2017, *Lotus*, which is about a prostitute in Shenzhen, which is famously a hub of prostitution or in the cities nearby, and her involvement with a young photojournalist who’s studying

prostitutes but gets involved with her. Was this inspired by your grandmum's stories and experiences and why did you choose to write it in present day Shenzhen? Did you research that? And what were you trying to say through that novel?

So yes, I wrote a novel. My first debut novel is called *Lotus*, which follows the life of a young migrant worker called Lotus. She becomes a sex worker. She's from Sichuan and grew up in a poverty stricken village. Led by the bright light of the city, she leaves her home to come to Shenzhen to work at first in a factory. Of course, things go wrong. Ever since I discovered my grandma's story, I became quite fascinated with prostitution, and I often wondered how she coped. And then, interestingly, not long after this revelation, I went down to Shenzhen. on a reporting trip. One day, very innocently I went to a hair salon. I wanted to get my hair cut. There were three young women there. They were all wearing showy clothes and they were all giggling. I said, "I want to get my hair cut." They just giggled, and they said, "We didn't know how to cut hair." I looked down on the floor. There was no hair shaving.

I suddenly clicked what kind of place [it was] . So there were young women, probably just 15, 17, 18, lots of young girls, they were from inland, from Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, this kind of inland area. They come to work in the factory and one of their colleagues got a job working at massage place and health saloons, just all front for brothels and get much paid and they thought life was easier. But anyway.

I mean, fundamentally, *Lotus* is a book about prostitution. It's to look at the impact of the reform and opening up on ordinary people. and also it's a book about a young woman, a journey of finding herself.

I'm keenly aware by that time. I was living a comfortable middle class life in Beijing. I'm writing about young women serving the lower end of the market. I know their life experience were very different from my own, so I did lots of interviews. I started writing but the earlier draft, just the character didn't kick off and I just think I didn't know them enough. On and off, for a few years, I worked as a volunteer for a charity based in Tianjin. They devote themselves to help female sex workers. My main job was to distribute condoms.

Also it's quite interesting, this charity, they do not try to persuade women to give up. They understand for many young women struggling in the bottom of society, prostitution that's one of the only means they can make a living. Instead, they provide help. For example, how to deal with the police, how to protect themselves. And they have right to, for example, if the clients refuse condoms, they can just refused to have sex with them and when one of them get caught, they try to help them to bail them out. Slowly some of them opened up to me and told me their life stories.

All the characters are made up but many small details are real.

And how, how did you find fiction different as a form to memoir in conveying these human truths about life in China?

Coming from a journalist background, I find fiction writing extremely challenging. You have the freedom to create a character. You have the right to kill your character to do whatever they want to do. But everything a character does has to be there's a sense of authenticity. So that freedom to create something is extremely intimidating, I find. It's exciting but also intimidating.

As I understand it, you're currently also researching the changing role of Chinese women, and their attitudes for your new projects. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What are some of the other challenges that Chinese women are facing today?

What I found quite interesting is ... I mentioned that reform and opening up have provided Chinese people, both men and women, unprecedented opportunities. But, unfortunately, the gender payroll has widened.

In another word, gender inequality has widened. Why is that? Because, as China transitioned from planned economy to the market economy, women took more than their fair share of burden and cost. For example, starting from the end of 1980s until 1990s, China began to reform state-owned enterprises. They began to lay off workers. State-owned enterprise's byword was "inefficient." So to increase the efficiency, they began to let off workers.

Women were always first to be let off. And far more women were let off. Once the women lose their job, it was much harder for them to find new jobs. In the 1980s, the gender pay gap, I think it was something like about 13%. Now as in 2024, that figure has doubled. So the gender pay gap now it's around 30%. So, which was

another reason for some women, they have no choice but to get into prostitution.

I feel that China's also become more socially conservative, it felt, in the last few years that I lived there. And you've seen this push, after the end of the one child policy, for example, for women to go back to the home and give birth to more children.

So on one hand, the gender inequality, the gender pay gap has been widening. On the other hand, feminist activism has been cracked down. For example, around the time of 2012, before Xi Jinping took power, feminist activism emerged. For example, on Valentine's Day in 2012, three young feminists marched the street in central Beijing, put on fake blood-splattered wedding gowns to protest against domestic violence. And there were other similar feminist activism. For example, occupying men's toilet. There were far more men's toilets than toilets for women. There were quite a lot of shows about vagina monologue and so on.

But after Xi Jinping came to power, he cracked down on feminists and feminist activism. I'm sure you know what happened in 2015. The day before International Women's Day, five feminists were arrested. Ever since then, there has been a crackdown against feminists because the authorities do not like organization, organized activity, and they see feminists as a potential causing social instability, which is a shame. A nationwide anti-domestic violence law was passed in 2016. I'm sure that had a lot to do with the push by the feminists. But now, everyday daily activism, feminist activism, still exists. But, the women find an interesting way to support themselves. They have social groups. They're interested in a kind of a daily feminism, like, for example, encourage each other not to want to be pressured by their family to have boyfriends, to get married, to have children.

When I went to China in the end of 2023, I went to Chengdu and one of the prominent feminists now runs a cafe and her cafe had become a center of feminist discussion. They have talks. They have people just go there and just share their ideas. So there has been a crackdown against the feminism in China. But women continue to find creative ways to push for gender equality.

So your next book coming out is a historical novel inspired by China's first feminist, Qiu Jin . Can you tell us a little bit about her?

Oh, Qiu Jin was and is absolutely fabulous. She was the most colorful and extraordinary character in contemporary China. We're talking about the end of the Qing dynasty. She was beheaded in 1907, four years before the downfall. In fact, she had a role in the downfall of the Qing. At that time, women were expected to stay at home but she had a public role. She ran a school to train insurgents trying to overthrow the Qing dynasty. They were Manchus, and the majority of the population were Han people like me.

Qiu Jin was a very colorful character, extraordinary. She loved to cross dress. She loved to dress up. She was a woman but she loved to put on men's clothes and she was very into martial arts and she rode horses, championed for women to ban the foot binding, give up foot binding, and things like that.

Then she was beheaded in 1907 for organizing a military uprising. Because of her death changed public opinion, so many people began to stand against the Manchus. She was an absolutely wonderful character. She drank like a fish. She wrote her poems. Hopefully, after the publication, I hope I can sell the film rights.

Many young feminists, for example, in a few days, I'm going to see Lee Maizi. She organized a queer choir, and I'm going to see her on Saturday. Okay. Yes, people like her, she looks up to Qiu Jin, and one of the songs Qiu Jin composed herself is called *nüquanzhige* (女权之歌), the Song of the Feminist, and she, the lesson is we have to fight. I think we cannot just sit around waiting, praying that gender equality will be materialized. I think you have to fight for it. And I'm very pleased to see that young women still find interesting ways to do so in China.

As my final question, what is your biggest take away from the last hundred plus years of changing status and challenges for women in China from Qiu Jin to today. Is it just that they have to fight?

Just that. They have to fight for themselves. We cannot just wait for the leaders who are more likely a man to grant us the equal rights.

Excellent. Well, we're all behind that fight. Thank you very much, Lijia, for coming on the podcast.

Yes, I'm, I'm glad you say so because I think to push for gender equality, we need to engage men.

Thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Thank you for having me. ■