

Long Hair Drama

Zhang Lijia

Zhang Lijia is an author and journalist living in Beijing. *Long Hair Drama* is adapted from her memoir *Socialism is Great*, to be published by Atlas books in 2008.

For ten years, I worked in a missile factory on the banks of the Yangtze River. Although I grew up in the residential compound of my mother's factory, and all my friends were the children of workers, I dreamt of becoming a journalist. I saw myself grasping a pen to write beautiful, compelling things. Instead, at the age of 16, I was grasping a toolbox and mother's "iron rice bowl" – a job for life in a state-owned factory.

The end of 1980 saw the dawn of reform but also roaring unemployment. To address the problem, the government introduced a temporary policy, allowing young people to take over their parents' positions. My mother, aged only 43, having pickled machine parts in acid most of her working life, decided to take advantage and retire, worried I might never land such a good job. Chenguang Machinery Manufacture in Nanjing, with its army of 10,000 workers, was among the largest and most prestigious enterprises in China, churning out civilian as well as military supplies, including the country's "fist product" – missiles.

From free nurseries to cremation, with countless bowls of rice in between, the life of a state employee provided cradle-to-grave

security. Workers were hailed as “big brothers”, “the masters of the nation”.

Yet I would have loved to have stayed on at school and later tried my luck entering university, as I was a good student. But I was *tinghua* too – obedient, the most desirable quality among Chinese children. *Ting* means listen and *hua*, words. Since I was little, I had been trained to listen to the words of parents, teachers and our Communist Party.

The first six months at the factory were the hardest. I felt miserable and out of place. My job was to test pressure gauges that, fitted to pipelines or containers, indicated capacity or physical status. I would screw the gauge to be tested, along with a control gauge, to a two-pronged pressure-checking device – left connector for the control gauge, right for the gauge being tested. Since both gauges measured the same pressure, a good gauge showed the same reading as the control gauge.

Simple and repetitive, the job taxed neither body nor brain. I did not know why I had been assigned to the gauges group, where the workload was far from demanding. Most of the day, my colleagues would sit smoking, sipping tea from enamel mugs blackened by tea leaves, and “*chuiniu*” – bragging or “blowing bull”. “Little Zhang, what will you do for the rest of the month?” they laughed at me, when I naively worked as hard as I could.

Later, I came to realise that surplus labour and low efficiency were characteristic of state-owned enterprise. China had faithfully replicated the Soviet Union’s central planning system in building its industrial structure. Just as enterprises, good and bad, received fixed funding from the state, so all workers received a standard salary, regardless of performance. That was what was meant by the “big rice pot”. A performance-linked bonus system, once despised by Chairman Mao, had recently been reintroduced. In reality, the difference this made was marginal.

As an apprentice, my most important duty of the morning was to fill our battered metal thermos with boiled water from a tank coated with black grease in the middle of the shop floor. After that, there was little else to do. I was not allowed to read my books and could only gaze out of the window at the high security wall circling the factory compound, guarded by armed soldiers. In my boredom, I turned my attention to a boy.

CLICK, CLACK, CLICK, CLACK ...,” When the percussive tap sounded from the corridor outside I was instantly flert. Soon, the source arrived in the doorway and walked into the workshop.

“Masters, have you all eaten?” Little Zhi, a colleague who tested electric gauges in another room along the corridor offered the common greeting in China – one which required no answer. A giant by local standards at 1.86 metres tall, his eyes were long and thin; the sparse moustache on his young face as out of place as legs painted on a snake. He settled cross-legged in a chair, one foot in the air showing off his shining leather shoes with half-moon metal plates on the soles – the source of the tapping. They were considered attractive – not everyone could afford leather footwear. As the only son of the most senior deputy director of the factory, and, perhaps more importantly, the newly found nephew of a man living in Taiwan, Zhi could afford certain luxuries.

“Don’t work too hard. Have a smoke,” he said, tossing out a round of cigarettes. So many Chinese men smoked, it seemed just part of being a man.

“*Aiya*, Marlboro!” A smile blossomed on Master Cheng’s stern face. In his 40s, his fine black hair was scrupulously combed back, in the way of many a top Chinese leader.

“My uncle brought them in from Taiwan,” Little Zhi explained casually. Two years my senior, but still an apprentice, his imported

cigarettes and his father's lofty position granted Zhi the status to take part in the masters' "blowing bull" and move freely between the two gauge workshops.

"Can I have one?" asked Master Lin, who rarely smoked. He sniffed its fragrance before poking the cigarette behind one ear, beside a ballpoint pen. His homemade woollen jumper stretched over his thick waist, round and solid as a millstone.

"How about me?" protested Master Li, a slight woman with a full-moon face. "I don't smoke, but my husband does. Thank you, that'll make his day."

"How about you, Little Zhang?" Little Zhang was my new name at the factory, where young people were addressed as "Little", and elders respectfully as "Master". "Save one for your boyfriend?" There was a glint in Zhi's thin eyes.

"Our Little Zhang has high standards," cut in Master Li. "No problem, entrust me as your matchmaker, I'll guarantee to find you a perfect man."

"An apprentice is not allowed to court," I reminded her sheepishly, pushing up my heavy black-framed glasses. I disliked colleagues laughing at my expense. There was much I disliked but had to endure since being sentenced to the factory.

The workshop, its air heavy with smoke and grease, was of similar size to my school classroom, where 50 students squeezed into four neat rows. Here, a large worktable with a plastic surface dominated the room, its wooden legs dark and shiny from countless greasy hands. Three devices for testing pressure gauges crouched on the corners of the table, where some work awaited the masters' attention, as if they were just taking a break. Despite the warmth and bright light I did not feel at ease in the workshop, perhaps because of the black iron window frames. Unlike the wooden frames at home, these were heavy and cold, almost hostile. Prison windows, I imagined, would look the same.

My own prison was located on the upper floor of unit 23. Workers in blue canvas uniforms and their machines toiled downstairs, a metallic orchestra of noise and industry around the clock. Engineers and the sundry cadres of Communist bureaucracy worked upstairs. Those upstairs, who laboured with their brains, were commonly known as cadres, enjoying higher social standing, better welfare benefits and a larger salary – but lower grain rations. As staff of the gauges group, we were the only ones up there who worked with our hands, which led some to mock us, with our doctor-like white coat uniform, as “neo-white-collar workers”. Little Zhi often teased that a “four eyes” such as myself ought to have a real white-collar.

“Where’s the boss?” said Little Zhi.

“Meeting, what else,” replied Master Cheng.

“Master Lin, practicing calligraphy again?” Zhi turned to Lin, who was copying lines from *The People’s Daily*. I threw a glance in his direction and spotted the headline: “Hold high the Socialist flag”. By reporting only good news and preaching to China’s one-billion-strong population about how to behave, the Communist Party mouthpiece had earned its reputation for being more effective than sleeping pills. Yet Lan copied pages at a time. At least it served one purpose – Lin appeared occupied, ready for the sudden inspections our work unit leaders sometimes sprang.

“Did you go catching cats last night?” Master Li cheerfully asked Little Zhi.

“Oh, yes.” Zhi began to brag about his night-time outings to catch cats with traps in the street. In theory all cats were wild, since keeping pets was prohibited, but a few people kept them secretly at home. Zhi’s craving for cat flesh, his favourite delicacy, must have saddened many households. “Snake and cat soup is so tasty! Do you know what it’s called?: ‘The battle between a dragon and a tiger.’”

I listened tentatively, not saying a word. I was attracted to this young man, a new breed to me. On each little finger he boasted

a nail fully 5 cm long. I was so impressed I insisted on measuring them. At my school teachers inspected our nails, cut to the quick. Historically, only wealthy and educated Chinese men kept their nails long – a show of status. Men who laboured with their hands would have to cut their nails short. Zhi always gave the same explanation for his long nails: “for convenience”, by which he meant convenience when picking his nose. Nevertheless, I thought everything about him was cool, especially the long shining hair almost touching his shoulders.

I did not think him interested in me – with my glasses he teased about so often and a skinny body like an undernourished bean sprout. I doubted any man would take a fancy of me. But I was better company than his two middle-aged female colleagues in the electric gauge workshop, also under the management of Boss Lan.

Boss Lan was less impressed by Zhi’s long hair. Having returned from his meeting, our softly spoken leader issued a stern warning: “Little Zhi, don’t get yourself into trouble. Cut your hair short. The political climate is tightening.”

Little Zhi tossed his long hair and left. The percussive tapping rose then faded in the corridor. I waited perpetually for that sound, the music in my life.

Since the” reform and opening up, a handful of young people have begun to worship capitalism,” preached political instructor Wang Aimin, the ideologue-in-chief of our unit, spittle flying over his notes and out into the audience. His cold eyes blinked involuntarily, lending a sinister look that belied his given name, Aimin – Love the People.

“Unable to distinguish between fragrant flowers and poisonous weeds, these young people pick up capitalist trash like the ‘trumpet trousers’ and rotten music,” Wang spat. “We must resolutely defend the ‘four cardinal principles’ of socialism!”

The colourful trash of capitalism was creeping into the grey kingdom through China's newly opened door and corrupting the minds of young people, according to those higher up. The summer of 1981 saw the conservatives win the upper hand with a campaign against bourgeois liberalism, symbolised by "trumpet trousers" – Chinese for "bell-bottoms".

Wang shouted out the new factory rules. High-heeled shoes and bright red lips were unacceptable; trouser width must be less than 22 cm but greater than 15 cm – tight trousers also were forbidden after press reports warned they could strangle fertility; men's hair must not pass the earlobes. The list went on.

But Karl Marx had longer hair than that! I swallowed this impossible retort and gazed at his grey locks, billowing to his shoulder in a giant wall poster behind Wang's head. The ceiling fans threw fast-changing shadows onto Marx and the other poster boys of Communism: Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and our very own Chairman Mao. Wafting hot and humid air around the dark hall, the fan over my head was making a small disturbing noise. Imagine the chaos if it span off the ceiling and into the dozing proletariat.

My mind soon wandered with my gaze out of the meeting hall to a drizzling grey world outside. We were in the plum rain season, when the plums ripened and the rains stretched down to the lower Yangtze. The workshop buildings reached tall into the sky, from them black chimneys rising higher still, slicing the skyline like the legs of a spider dead on its back. I would sing their praise with stock phrases, these "magnificent chimneys soaring into the sky", the symbols of socialist progress.

These endless meetings broke up the monotony of the workshop, the government relaying political messages voiced by faithful Party servants. Political Instructor Wang, his speech "long and rotten as old granny's foot-binding cloth", was sending some to sleep; and asleep, Master Lin's millstone body sat up straight, peaked cap

hiding his closed eyes, cigarette still dangling behind an ear. Such mastery had he achieved that if he avoided snoring no one would know he was not awake. Beside me, Boss Lan groomed his fine moustache. He had no need to shave, but plucked a few hairs in idle moments. Master Li gossiped, hardly moving her lips. Little Zhi tended his long nails.

“Today is your first warning. I shall not mention anyone’s name.” Political Instructor Wang shot a disapproving glance towards Little Zhi. “You’d better go for a pee and take a good look at yourself.” Wang often mixed earthy sayings into his political hectoring. Few of the dozy audience appreciated his humour, so he finished his speech with a threat. “Sort yourself out quickly. I am not always so polite!”

After the meeting, Wang summoned Boss Lan. Upon his return, Lan called us together to discuss the spirit of the new campaign, and demand that Little Zhi cut his hair short.

“No, it’s my personal business,” Zhi replied, with a defiant toss of his rule-breaking hair.

I stared at him unblinking; where did he get his panther’s nerve to oppose the authorities? But I knew he would not win. Personal business? Privacy had no place in our society. After penetrating the factory gate, I had learnt that even one’s period was not private. Once a month every woman reported to the hygiene room to face the “period police”. If satisfied with the bloody evidence, the nurse would issue a pack of sanitary towels as part of a woman’s welfare package; failure to bleed would invite a visit from the dreaded family planning officers.

“Long hair is precisely a symptom of bourgeois liberalism. Political Instructor Wang has made that very clear,” Boss Lan said in a harsh tone.

“I remember, during the Cultural Revolution, if the Red Guards

spotted any woman wearing a perm, they would shave all her hair off,” said Master Cheng, who liked to recall the past to remind colleagues of his seniority.

“But the Cultural Revolution is over,” I dared to say.

The next day, Little Zhi arrived at work wearing a green army cap, despite the heat. His hair was shorter, but still crept over the critical earlobe limit. “A wise man will not fight when the odds are obviously against him,” Master Lin said, trying folk wisdom. All around him took a turn but Zhi stubbornly guarded his hair, a brave soldier protecting a besieged city.

Sundown left a trail of blood-red clouds in the western sky, yet Evening offered no respite from the burning heat. With the plum rain season at an end Nanjing renewed its reputation as one of China’s four furnace cities, the temperature soaring over 40 degrees, or so we all believed – the government reported only 38 or 39. Yes, even the temperature was dictated by the authorities. Once it officially exceeded 37 degrees one working hour would be cut from the day. If it topped 40, all could go home.

The loudspeakers spitting propaganda and stirring tales of model workers were all the more unbearable in such heat. But I was riding away from them.

Two sentries stood at the factory gate, still as robots. When I passed, I stepped off my bike, right foot brushing the ground like a dragonfly skimming water, before getting back in the saddle. I had quickly learnt not to bother showing my work pass. “Warmly congratulate the successful launch of the carrier rocket,” read a massive sign papered over the entrance above the sentries’ heads, the bold red characters fading into pink after so much rain. Not long before, China had blasted a carrier rocket into the Pacific demonstrating its capability of carrying multiple warheads. The missile would enable China, for the first time, to strike at the

continental United States. I knew my factory had played a role since each worker was awarded a generous bonus.

“See, what a great job I got you! Benefit your whole life.” My mother looked out for such occasions, as if to convince herself the decision to retire early had been the right one. By now, she was grudgingly collecting market fees from private business, a job she regarded as degrading for a former state-owned enterprise worker.

A whole life in Chenguang? I let out a long sigh as I pedalled over the sticky tarmac road, realising that my entire life was restricted to a ten-minute bike ride, all within the boundary of the immense compound: going to the factory to work in the morning, lunching in the factory’s dining hall, returning home to one of the factory’s residential areas, taking a shower at the factory’s shower house or receiving indoctrination at its cinema. If only I were not so *tinghua*, if only I had a little of Little Zhi’s panther nerve, I would have happily remained at school.

I was on my way to visit my little hero. I had not seen him for more than two weeks. Shortly after the denouncement of “capitalist trash” as the enemy of the people, Little Zhi was caught by the “secret agents” – plain-clothes security personnel who scoured the factory for workers whose appearance was tainted. That morning, Zhi was told to get a proper haircut if he ever wanted to set foot in the factory again. He had not done so since.

When he failed to show up Boss Lan had called his home, one of the few with a telephone. Zhi had returned for money and clothes before storming out again, his mother said. She begged Boss Lan not to inform Zhi’s father. Not yet.

The silence of the corridor, without Zhi’s tapping, marked his absence. When rumour reported his return I decided to pay him a visit, worried that he would lose his job. The labour law stated that any employee who failed to report for work for 15 days was considered to have left the position. I had never taken a serious

interest in a boy before but the spark of affection had brightened my life, otherwise still and stale as a pool of stagnant water.

There were many people outside the compound. Having fled from their cramped bamboo steamer rooms, they peeled off their clothes, and splashed the pavement with buckets of water, again and again. But the heat bounced back, humidity heavily in the air. High in the trees, cicadas chirped mechanically, on and on.

Sweat crawled on my sticky skin like ants that had somehow made their way into my throat too. I coughed nervously as I knocked on his door.

“*Aiya*, please come in!” Zhi’s elegant mother greeted me, delighted a colleague had come to visit. She led me into her son’s room, where he lay on a sofa, listening to songs by the pretty-faced Taiwanese singer Teresa Deng. Colourful lights danced on the cassette player as the music played.

“Little Zhang, how come? Which wind brought you here?” He stood up in surprise. He wore “trumpet trousers” with large flares, and a white singlet, rolled up to his stomach as if exposing some flesh would provide relief from the heat. I could not avoid noticing what a bamboo stick he was without the cover of his loose white shirt.

“Er, I’ve just been to the shower house. I came to see how you’re getting on.” I pushed my glasses back up my nose, trying to sound causal.

“Sit, sit.” He pointed at a sofa opposite, rolled down his singlet and moved to turn the music off.

“Please, just lower the volume.” Being alone in a young man’s room, I felt uncomfortable and hoped Deng’s feminine voice would put me at my ease. I enjoyed the chance to listen to “rotten music” – Deng’s songs were banned from public radio. Her sweet voice, whispering soft words of love, felt like a gentle breeze after the violent gale of revolutionary songs.

As the music faded into the background, I sank deeper into the first sofa I had ever sat on. A fan on the wooden floor blasted air across the spacious room. These block buildings were designed in the 1950s by the “Old Hairy Ones” – our nickname for the hirsute Soviet experts sent to guide the factory’s missile programme before political differences saw them off in the 1960s. Now, the spacious blocks housed factory dignitaries.

“What a luxury to have your own room!” I could hardly contain my envy. At home, I shared a bed with my grandma and my younger brother.

“Alright,” he grunted and lit a cigarette, waiting for me to take the conversation on.

“Are you going to leave the factory?”

“Not sure yet,” he replied, brushing his hair with his long fingers. Some friends had proposed setting up a business, but he was not convinced. “Don’t really fancy the hard work, though the money could be good.”

“So why don’t you go back to work until you have a mature plan?”

His mother, eavesdropping from behind the door, stepped into our conversation with green tea and a plea. “Listen, listen to your colleague, please. I am worried to death. If you are expelled by the factory, where will your father put his face? He’ll die ...”

“Stop nagging, old woman!” Zhi shouted at his mother. “I hate that fucking factory, so many fucking rules. Do you know, on that day, that stupid secret agent wanted to measure my hair with a ruler!”

“But you can’t just hang around at home forever!” his mother snorted.

“I can if I want.” He sounded like a spoiled child, complaining about food did not like. His mother was worried; he was not.

I had admired his courage. But now I saw his war of resistance

was rooted in stubbornness, and in the knowledge that, as a privileged son of the system, his problem would be solved for him.

His mother softened her tone: “Look, as long as you agree to go back to the factory, I’ll arrange everything.”

Little Zhi returned to work a few days later, his hair – still long *Lin* style – cut just above the earlobes. His director father had been informed of the situation, and arrangements had been made. Zhi received a mild punishment with the excuse that he had been tending to his sick mother. But I didn’t think his long hair was so cool anymore – it was a mere façade, a plea for attention, not the statement of rebellion I had believed.

The percussive tapping returned to the corridor but it was no longer musical to me. A ripple in my stagnated pool had subsided.