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Follow-up Interview with Lijia Zhang, author of *Socialism is Great!*

May 6, 2009 in [China Annals](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

Last June, Nicole Barnes of the *China Beat* [interviewed](#) Lijia Zhang, author of the acclaimed book *Socialism is Great!*, whose [paperback edition](#) has just been released by RandomHouse. Here is a follow-up interview with Ms. Zhang about her recent (and ongoing) book tour, her upcoming book, and women's issues in Asia:

Nicole Barnes: You recently completed your book tour for *Socialism is Great!* Where did you speak about your book?

Lijia Zhang: I have not completed my book tour yet. My French publisher has promised to invite me for a promotional tour this autumn when the French version comes out. I'll also visit Holland where the Dutch translation has just been published. It is being translated into Hebrew, and I am sure that there will be more to follow.

I spoke at various festivals: literature festivals in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai, the LA Times Festival of Books, the Melbourne Writers Festival, the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Bali, and the Jaipur Literature Festival in India.

I've given many talks at universities, book stores, organizations and institutions interested in China and foreign correspondents clubs. I've also received invitations to talk to women's groups and multinational companies as an inspirational speaker.

NB: Were the audiences different in each location (did you see different mixes of men and women, ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese, etc)? Where did you get the best reception?

LZ: The book isn't distributed in China, unfortunately. My Chinese friends, of course, all claim to like the book. One woman from Shanghai telephoned me to thank me for recording an era which seemed to have been forgotten. One young man wrote to me to question if the "period police" was true. I assured him that was just common practice. But I wouldn't be surprised if some young nationalistic youths didn't like the book.

I think the popularity of the book also reflects a rising interest in China. Many in the West also feel uncomfortable about China and China's rapid rise. I get lots of questions along that line: what's China's future? Is China a threat to the world?

The best reaction I received was in India. I attended the Jaipur Literature Festival and toured the country a little. My publisher HarperCollins promoted me as the first Chinese writer to be published in India. The book, and myself indeed, received massive media attention – about 20 reviews and profile stories.

NB: In the [China Beat review](#) of Indian author Pallavi Aiyar's book *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China*, Aiyar mentions that she felt safer and freer as a woman in China than in India. When you were in India, did anything strike you as particularly revealing of gender differences between the two countries?

LZ: I love India. It is such a colorful place with vibrant culture and friendly people. Aiyar is actually a friend of mine. I tend to agree with her there. Foreign women probably feel safer and freer in China. Personally, I did have some propositions in India (I've been there three times), but no really unpleasant experience.

Educated Indian women are very assertive, free, and their values and life styles are not that different from those of Western women. It's a completely different ball game for the poor rural women. I met a

27-year-old young widow in a desert village in Rajasthan. She is supposed to live the rest of her life on her own. I am also amazed by the caste system and how democracy has not crushed it and how it has not granted women a more liberal and tolerant social environment.

Overall, I think women in China are better off than are their sisters in India.

NB: After you've seen international reactions to your book, is there anything you would have done differently in it, such as sections that you would have deleted or expanded upon?

LZ: So many people asked me what happened. I should have written an epilogue to update the readers on the main happenings of my life. As a matter of fact, I've done so for the paperback edition, which has just been released.

NB: Did anything about your reception or people's reactions to your book surprise you?

LZ: Overall, I am surprised and absolutely delighted by the reaction, which has been better than I ever expected.

A friend half-joked with me, saying it's a girly book. But I've found that people across the board seem to have taken a liking to the book. I often get e-mails from readers who congratulate me for a writing a book they enjoyed; some ask what happened after the book and others demand a sequel. One Australian man threatened, "if you don't write a sequel, I'll go to Tiananmen to shout your name until you do so!" In fact, most of these people are men. Last night, a man from America called me in the middle of the night just to say how much he loved the book!

NB: What book are you working on now?

LZ: I am revising my first novel *Lotus*, about prostitution in modern day China – not based on real life experience but a pure work of fiction.

NB: What led you to that topic?

LZ: My grandma was a low-grade prostitute, like the leading character in the book. I always have this fascination about her life and how she coped. For me, prostitution is just a vehicle to explore social tensions caused by fast changes in society.