PRIVATE REVOLUTIONS

Coming of Age in a New China

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致外公，外婆和老祖祖：你们教会了我如何讲故事。
致妈妈爸爸：因为你们，我才有故事可以讲。

For my maternal grandfather, grandmother and
great-grandmother, who taught me how to tell stories.

For *mama* and *baba*, who gave me a story to tell.

Guide to Names

The Chinese names in this book are written in the official *pinyin* system of romanised Mandarin Chinese that was invented by the Chinese Communist Party as part of its nation-building project in the 1950s. In Chinese, each character is one syllable. First names are usually one or two syllables, with equal stresses on each syllable.

Take note:

- Q = 'ch' as in 'cheese'
- X = 'sh' as in 'shush'
- Z = 'ds' as in 'reads'
- 'Zh' = this sound is sometimes taught to English speakers as 'r' as in 'work', but in southern Chinese accents, it is pronounced 'ds' as in 'reads'

Siyue: 'ss' (as in 'hiss') + 'y-weh'
Sulan, Siyue's mother: 'sue' + 'lan'
Guilan, Siyue's maternal grandmother: 'g-way' + 'lan'
Ziqiang, Siyue's uncle: 'ds' + 'ch-yang'
Jiaolong, the boy in Siyue's class: 'jow' (as in 'jowl') + 'long'
Jinghua, the girl in Siyue's dorm: 'jing' (rhymes with 'king') + 'h-wah'
Fanghui: 'f-ah-ng' + 'h-way'
Zijian, Siyue's father: 'ds' + 'j-yen')

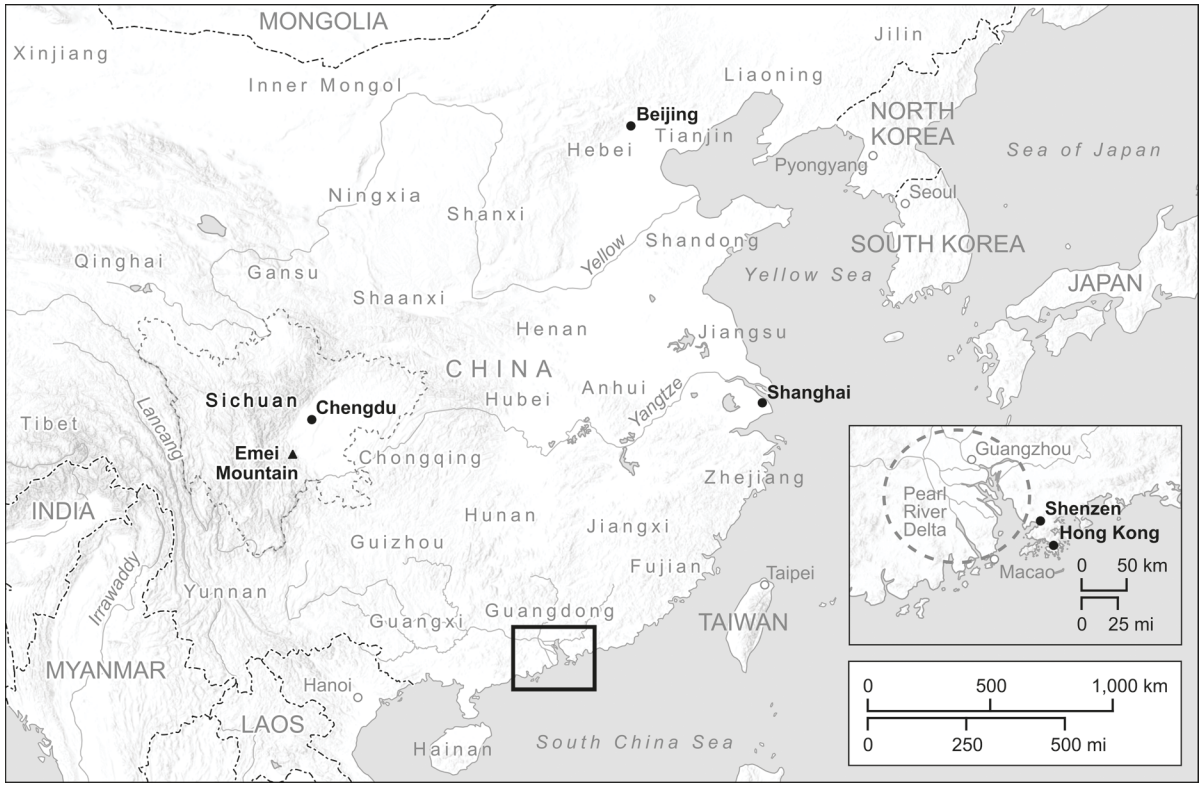
June:
Gaolin: 'gow' (rhymes with 'wow') + 'lin'

Leiya: 'Lay' + 'yah'
Chufeng: 'choo' (as in 'choose') + 'fun-g'
Xinling: 'shin' + 'ling'
Guihua: 'g-way' + 'h-wah'
Yulan: 'y-wee' + 'lan'

Sam:
Zhao, Sam's mother: 'ds-ow' (rhymes with 'wow')
Zhou Xiuyun: 'ds-oh' ('oh' as in 'oath') 'show' + 'y-win'

Dan:

Yubin, Dan's grandmother: 'y-wee' + 'bin'


MONGOLIA
Xinjiang
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NORTH KOREA
Pyongyang
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Seoul
Ningxia
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SOUTH KOREA
Yellow
Yellow Sea
Qinghai
Gansu
Shaanxi
JAPAN
Henan
Jiangsu
CHINA
Anhui
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Sichuan
Chengdu
Hubei
Yangtze
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Lancang
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Chongqing
Zhejiang
INDIA
Hunan
Jiangxi
Guizhou
Fujian
Taipei
Irrawaddy
Yunnan
Guangxi
Guangdong
TAIWAN
MYANMAR
Hanoi
LAOS
Hainan
South China Sea
Guangzhou
Pearl River Delta
Shenzen
Hong Kong
Macao
0 50 km
0 25 mi
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0 250 500 mi

Preface

My maternal grandparents married in 1961, amid a man-made famine. On her wedding night, the bride walked home along streets shared by the bodies of the dead. Her colleagues had surprised her with an extravagant wedding gift – a handful of boiled sweets – which she held like gemstones in her pocket.

My parents were born after the harvests returned and began secondary school in the 1970s. At the start of each autumn term, my father would pay for his textbooks with barrowfuls of sweet potatoes. My paternal grandparents grew fields of the purple-skinned roots, which came into season in the early autumn and lasted throughout the winter.

My father had enough to eat, so long as what he wanted to eat was sweet potato. Every year, in the waning days of winter, he would get sick of their creamy caramel-orange hearts, the cloying mouthfeel that stuck no matter how they were cooked. He would start dreaming of the watermelon crop, two seasons away. But by the dog days of summer, sleeping with a hoard of watermelons under his bed, he would tire of their watery emptiness and long for sweet potatoes again.

I was born in 1990. One of my first words was *ga-ga*, the Sichuanese baby-talk for 'meat'. Every morning, my maternal great-grandmother would strap me to her back and walk down the hillside from my grandparents' apartment to the village

market. She would run her fingers over the thick stems of asparagus lettuce, the fluffy pea shoots, the bumpy-skinned bitter gourds, naming each of them for me. I would wave my fat fist towards the red meat hanging from the butcher's hooks and say *ga-ga*.

My great-grandma would smile and buy the meat, and back home, she would proudly recount: *the little one said she wanted meat!*

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In a country where the gap between rural and urban meant everything, I lived with my maternal grandparents in a place that straddled the two. It was a Communist work unit, or *danwei*, purposefully buried in the mountains of China's south-western interior to defend against potential attacks from the Soviet Union in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s, when the two states' alliance broke down. In 1964, the government sent a team of engineers to Sichuan province to build the country's first semiconductor materials factory at the foothills of the holy Buddhist mountain of Emei. It was a tiny town planted into the countryside.

In the planned economy of the Mao era, the *danwei* did not only organise industrial production, but also provided a complete social infrastructure for workers to live within. My grandparents expected their *danwei* to take care of them, and it did.

Every weekday morning, we would wake around 6 a.m. to the sound of the loudspeakers playing the national anthem. An exodus of workers would make their way from the apartments on the hillside down to the factory near the village square. At lunchtime, they would go back home again to eat.

This job-for-life arrangement was called the 'iron rice bowl'. In my grandparents' factory, the rice was even steamed

collectively. My grandfather would bring raw rice into the office in a tin lunch box, and place it between his many colleagues' lunch boxes in a metre-wide steaming pot. They would take the boxes home for lunch.

We had no running hot water at home, so to shower, the residents of the *danwei* would walk downhill past the factory gates and the ping-pong stadium to the communal showers. My grandpa would disappear into one doorway, and my grandma and I into another. At weekends, everyone had more time, and women and children congregated in the shower room, an open space without cubicle walls. The showerheads blasted bountiful hot water at high pressure, the steam billowing up the concrete walls. Children took small plastic buckets and toys for playing in the water. It had the atmosphere of a family outing, like going to the seaside.

Employees' children went to the primary school run by the *danwei*. It was much better than the rural schools nearby. Like the engineers who worked at the factory, the teachers of the *danwei* school were brought in from cities further afield.

In 1978, after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping took over the Communist Party leadership and began capitalist reforms, beginning the era of 'Reform and Opening Up'. In the 1990s, the government rewrote the social contract. With the broader aim of instilling market competition and preparing China for accession to the World Trade Organization, the government started shutting down and privatising the old state-owned enterprises. In the decade after 1993, 50 million workers were laid off. Initially, the privatisation of the state enterprises was a free-for-all. Managers and local party bosses grabbed assets for themselves while leaving workers with nothing.

China experienced a wave of worker unrest. Many of these workers felt deeply betrayed by the state. Under the *danwei* system, they were a relatively privileged class: urban workers were accorded great respect under the Communist social order. Now they saw their *danweis* being ripped apart by financiers, party officials and managers, whose status was rising far above their own.

But by then, my grandparents were almost retired. Their factory, being of national technological importance, was kept in the arms of the state, and remained rich. They expected their *danwei* to take care of them, and it did.

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On the other side of my family, my paternal grandparents were peasants. My father, who was born into rural poverty, knew he would do better than his parents, so long as he got off the sweet-potato farm. He got into a university on the other side of China, in my mother's south-western home province. My parents entered Sichuan University in 1981, becoming some of the first students to take up places at the newly reopened universities that Mao had closed during the Cultural Revolution. After they graduated in 1985, the government assigned them to teaching posts at a recently established university on the east coast.

I was born on that coastal campus. Shortly after, my mother moved to another Chinese university to pursue a doctorate in ancient history, while my father left for the UK to do the same in computer science. It was a simple decision for him: all the students who could leave were doing so. Chinese academia lagged behind the West, especially in the sciences, and the Beijing government's massacre of students and workers in Tiananmen Square in 1989 had left many questioning the future of China's universities. But neither of my parents was

capable of taking a baby with them. Before my first birthday, my great-grandma took me on the two-day train ride to Emei Mountain, to live with her and my grandparents.

My grandfather had never taken care of an infant before I arrived, because he himself had left home to work in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan's provincial capital, when my mother was small. But he discovered by chance that when I cried in the middle of the night for my mother's milk, he could calm me down by telling me stories. After many months of this, I started telling him stories back. They featured me, my grandma and grandpa.

When I turned four, my parents plucked me from my home in the Sichuanese mountains and took me to England. In the photo of me leaving my grandparents at the departures gate in Beijing Capital Airport, my grandma stands next to my grandpa, who is holding me in his arms while I cling on to his grey shirt. The three of us look dismayed, rather than excited, about my journey to a place with many more opportunities than a small town in Sichuan.

From then on, I only visited China in the summer holidays, when I went on the pilgrimage back to my grandparents' home. The whole country to me was encompassed by the smell of white gardenias growing in my grandparents' vegetable patch, the feel of the wet heat of the south-western Chinese summer. Nothing seemed to change in my grandparents' *danwei* until I turned eighteen, when a tarmac road unfurled from it to Emei's town centre.

This was the China I knew before I returned to live there in 2016 as a journalist for the *Financial Times*. My impetus to return to the country partly came from a desire to immerse myself in the language. I had studied economics with a focus

on developing countries, thinking I would work on the problems of poverty, but what we learned in the classroom was far removed from what happened on the ground. I wanted to be there. My parents were supportive: my mother, who had studied ancient Chinese literature and history, had always wanted me to connect to the culture that had been her passion.

I moved to the arid northern capital of Beijing, and finally, in my mid-twenties, came to know China on my own terms. I booked my own long-distance trains, no longer being shuttled around like a piece of luggage like I had as a child.

Before I went back to China, I knew the optimistic giddiness of my parents' generation, where they could expect to out-earn their parents no matter what, so long as they got out of the village. When I arrived, I found the onset of now-pervasive class anxieties. There was the fear of rural families that the gap between them and urban families had widened so much that their children would find it difficult to make it in the city. And there was the fear of well-off urban parents that their wealth came from luck and timing and an unrepeatable economic boom, and their children would struggle to have the same fortune.

A friend of mine calls this latter worry the fear of 'falling off the ladder'. Over the past three decades, the ladder has grown very tall.

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In my first summer in Beijing, I was at a rooftop party when a young woman tapped me on the shoulder.

'Hello,' she said, 'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. You speak with a bit of a Sichuanese accent. I'm from Sichuan! And you sound like you're a journalist. I'm a journalist, too!'

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'Hello,' she said, 'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. You speak with a bit of a Sichuanese accent. I'm from Sichuan! And you sound like you're a journalist. I'm a journalist, too!'

Thus began my friendship with Dan. Later, she would tell me that I had looked so desperately naive about the ways of China's big cities that she had felt the need to intervene. She, too, had once been a newcomer in a city. And she resented that city for barring her from calling it home.

Like me, Dan was born in 1990. Like mine, her parents also pursued their dreams in a faraway place: for them, it was the up-and-coming southern coastal city of Shenzhen. They joined the hundreds of millions of migrant workers who left the countryside every year to make a living in the cities, where they could earn several times what they made on their farms.

So Dan and I were left with our maternal grandparents in Sichuan. This was very normal at the time, and is only slightly less so now. It made us technically part of the vast class of 'left-behind children' created by migration to cities. The term is synonymous with educational disadvantage and emotional abandonment. But Dan and I were both lucky not to experience it that way: we were the centre of the world to our grandparents. My great-grandma stayed at home and would cook for us all, narrating each step of the recipe to me in her continuous Sichuanese patter long before I could speak; when my grandparents came home from the factory, they loved to make up stories to tell me.

Just before we started school, our parents took us away again. Dan's parents brought her to Shenzhen. Sitting sandwiched on the train between the uncles who were taking her away from her grandparents was the first time she ever recalled feeling lonely.

I learned to speak English. Dan learned to speak standard Mandarin, rather than the Sichuanese dialect she had grown up with. Through luck and family connections, she managed to get a place at a state-run city school.

Initially, Dan didn't think about the differences between her and her classmates, almost all of whom had been raised by urban families in Shenzhen. She started to wonder during middle school, when she was given a form for her parents to fill in that required them to list their occupations.

By then, Dan's father was working as a bike mechanic, operating out of a cart by the side of the road. Looking at the form, he hesitated for a long time before finally writing: 'Sole trader'. Dan felt the label didn't quite fit. *To be a sole trader, don't you need to at least own a shop?* she thought.

Soon she started hiding her family's circumstances from her classmates. This was particularly difficult because her father's bike-mechanic cart was always parked on the side of a street that her classmates sometimes passed by after school. He often pumped their tyres without revealing who he was; he didn't want to embarrass Dan. She never brought school friends home to the cramped apartment they shared with two other families.

In her early teens, Dan was forced to leave the city. It turned out to be easier for my parents to become British nationals a decade after arriving in the UK than it was for Dan's parents to change their rural *hukou* – the household registration that divides China into geographical classes – into a Shenzhen city *hukou*. A *hukou* determines where you can go to school, access public health care, and other government services; it used to dictate where you could live and work, and still conditions where you can buy property.

A year after I became British, Dan had to go back to Sichuan. Her luck with the school system had run out. Even though she was always near the top of her class at her middle school, she needed a Shenzhen *hukou* in order to take the university entrance exams in the city.

At the age of fourteen, she left Shenzhen and started school in the town nearest her family's village, which was still a full day's travel away from her grandparents. Dan went to live in a dormitory at her new school. She learned to stop speaking in standard Mandarin, and went back to Sichuanese.

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Hearing Dan's story caused me to reflect on what might have happened had my parents remained in China. If they hadn't left for the UK, my parents could have stayed in the coastal city where I was born, in Ningbo. I could have grown up learning how to crack snow crabs from their crusts. I would have been part of China's first major wave of children born into urban prosperity, raised with expectations of continuous rise. But by the late 2000s, when I was ready to take the entrance exams for university, I would have been competing with over 10 million high-school-educated children across China, rather than the 3 million that my parents were up against.

Maybe I would have got into a Beijing university and settled in the capital. My parents would own the flat their *danwei* had assigned them in Ningbo, but the value of a flat in a third-tier city would be nowhere near enough to help me settle down in Beijing. Back in the UK, my friends shut out of London call themselves 'Generation Rent'. My friends in Beijing are 'Generation Involution': the term, taken from anthroplogy, has recently become popular in China, and means a system which absorbs ever more effort for ever less return.

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The more I spoke to my friends about their perceptions of social mobility in China today, the more stories I heard of women whose paths to the big city had been long and winding, and who had to remake themselves over and over. I began to look for women whose stories exemplified the

changes in the Chinese economy over the past thirty years, who could speak to what it felt like to live through such rapid dislocation. News journalism usually sees economic shifts at the scale of a whole country; I wanted to write at the scale of an individual's interior life.

This book is about revolutions in two senses. It is about China's economic revolution from the 1980s and 90s onwards, after the Reform and Opening Up era, when private enterprise became legal and state planning was partially replaced with market mechanisms.

It is also about the personal revolutions undertaken by four young women born in those decades as they came of age amid the inconsistent rise – and now stumble – of social mobility in China's capitalist era. Leiya, born in a patriarchal rural village, wants to escape a gendered destiny where she is only seen as useful for bearing sons. June, born in a remote mountain village, has her curiosity sparked by a chance meeting with a teacher from afar. Siyue, born to rural entrepreneurs, rebels against her teachers in school, and then remakes the education system for others. And Sam, born to urban middle-class parents, is inspired by the Marxist revolutionaries who founded modern China, and wants to recreate their legacy.

My stories are centred around women who still mainly carry the social role of producing and shaping the next generation. This means they exemplify China's transformations on many levels: in schools, in factories and in the home.

But I also write about women because I found that women were more willing to open up to me – an interviewer and friend of similar age, gender and ethnicity – about the intimate transformations that accompanied the social and economic shifts in their lives. Over the course of my six years of reporting in China, my interviewees took me into

their homes. I saw what is passed on from grandmother to mother to daughter, what is lost, and what is invented afresh. I am incredibly grateful to them for entrusting me with their stories.

Since the mid-2010s, deepening political repression and censorship has made it ever more difficult to gain intimate access to Chinese interviewees. I feel glad to have been in China just before the door to the outside world started closing. Local government and police interference, or the threat of it, stopped me from speaking to many more people.

We are entering an era in Chinese politics where sensitivities are increasingly unpredictable and arbitrary, where what was acceptable yesterday becomes unexpectedly dangerous today. The state surveillance and propaganda systems are not only built to repress stories that might challenge the regime, they are now built to repress nearly all stories, whether they show the darkness or the light of life in China.

In an effort to protect my interviewees from state harassment, I have anonymised them to the extent possible, and changed non-historical dates and the names of certain locations. I have removed many details I would have wished to include. Their stories, however, speak for themselves.

I do not believe in an inevitable march from poverty to progress. Life gets worse and better for different groups in different ways. The diversity of stages of economic development within China means that its problems are a microcosm of the world's. China's urban–rural divide has grown wide enough that its big cities exemplify the urban problems of the global north, while its rural villages still retain the problems of the global south. Meanwhile, rich economies like those of the US and UK have also become more dualistic, with a widening gap between winners and losers.

Any mass transformation of society requires, and results in, massive change at the level of individuals, friendships and families. Yet it is also easy, at a time of such breakneck change, to lose sight of what it feels like to be alive. The four women in this book show us how we both create and are recreated by societal changes. I hold up their stories as a mirror to our own.