

**THE SAD STORY OF ZHENG ERJI WHO LANDED IN THE CITY
THROUGH THE FAVORS REFORM-ERA POLICIES BESTOWED...
BUT REWROTE THE RULES WHILE SUFFERING WRONGS,ONCE THERE¹**

One typically sizzling summer afternoon in the Central China city of Wuhan in early September 1998, in need of custom-made sandals and disappointed that in Hong Kong no longer could a shop specializing in that trade be found, I strolled the streets, wondering if that old Hong Kong business might--like so many others--have relocated to the Mainland. About to give up hope, I noticed a small, eager Chinese woman crouching by the curb, displaying a crude signboard announcing that she was there to repair shoes. That was the beginning of my acquaintance with Zheng Erji, a woman who now calls me "*dajie*" [elder sister]. I immediately questioned her: "*Ruguo ni hui xiuli xiezi, ni ye hui buhui zuo xiezi?*" [If you can repair shoes, can you also make them?]. She nodded in the affirmative and soon she was at work on my first two pairs of hand-made, custom-made sandals.

I didn't give the encounter much thought at the time, just came back several days afterward and picked up my shoes. But the following year, back in the city at the same season, I decided to seek her out again. I figured she would likely still be installed in the exact same place, and sure enough she was. I was greeted as if I were a once-lost god, returned from Heaven expressly to bless her life, and that did strike me as a bit odd. It was only a few days later that I learned the significance in her life of that particular day. It happened that the very date on which I returned to her station

¹From interviews, January 11 and 12, 2004, Wuhan. All the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, but all the people are real.

on the sidewalk was also the day her two young boys' school bills had to be paid. Had I not arrived with cash in hand to order yet another two pairs of homemade shoes, her children would not have been able to register for that semester.

Zheng rapidly grasped the opportunity of having a foreign client who seemed interested in her situation to beg me to take her smaller son, then aged six--and, of course--without a word of English to his credit, back to America so he could be given a proper education. She explained that she was unable to afford to raise that boy properly. I was troubled by this plea, but felt utterly incapable of complying with her request. At the same time, she had also mentioned being short about 300 *yuan* per month, the very sum of money then essential to educate her children.

As I tossed in my hotel bed that night, pondering what I might be able to do to help, all at once it occurred to me that it might be possible to assist her simply by sending a monthly check in the amount of about \$40 US (the equivalent then of 3000 yuan). By the time this solution had hit me, it was still afternoon in Chicago. So I telephoned a colleague who lives in Chicago and who was raised in China and asked if such a thing could be done. When he assured me it could be, I resolved there and then to adopt this family (informally, I should add). From that late summer night in 1999 until now, I have been able to claim that I have a "family" in Wuhan, and the two boys are convinced that they have a "*Meiguo mama*" [American mother]. As for Zheng Erji herself, she thereupon became my little sister, and I her "*dajie*."

The basic outline of her life, which she related to me on one of our first encounters, was totally threaded through with the impacts of the political vacillations of the Chinese state after 1949. Because of the various forms of policy liberalization linked to the post-1978 economic reforms, along with her own personal mettle, soon after 1980 she was able to leave her rural, suburban home on the outskirts of Wuhan, where she had existed with a "*nongmin hukou*," [rural household registration], eventually to work in the city at a state-owned shoe-making factory. There she met her

future husband, a man endowed with an urban household registration [*feinongmin hukou*], and married in 1987. The two gave birth to a boy in 1989, who, through some awful accident (too terrible to reveal to me even after some six years of friendship), lost sight in one eye at the age of about 19 months. Mrs. Zheng keeps herself relatively well informed about government policy, and knew that if one's first child was disabled it was permitted to have a second.

But, quite unfortunately for the family, son the second appeared in early 1992, before the necessary permission for his presence on earth had been granted. The factory in which both Mrs. Zheng and her husband had been employed precipitously discharged them both. The shock of such treatment--at a time years before the policy of "*xiagang*" [or layoffs] had been enunciated and popularized--instantly turned this man into a social outcast, impairing his sanity at the same time. According to Mrs. Zheng's account, supporting the family then became her responsibility alone; she considers her husband unable to handle a steady job. Though she has managed from time to time to find scholarship funds for her boys of one sort or another, her life became a constant struggle from that day onward.

Zheng has always adapted to her fate and dreamed of ambitions. The openness of the economy during economic reforms allowed her to move into Wuhan and to marry an urban man; it also allows her to try to earn a livelihood when her family's original source of sustenance was denied it because of other state policies (the one-child policy). But the arbitrariness of officialdom has beset her and her family time and again from the days of Mao Zedong up to the present. Yet, despite the abuse visited upon her, Zheng maintains a persisting sense of what is fair and she continues to feel that fairness and justice is her due.

While I have kept in fairly close contact with the family, visiting them at least once a year since 1999, occasionally exchanging letters, calling long distance, and sending growing sums of money as the years have passed, I never took the trouble to

sit Zheng down and hear her details of her entire story until January 2004. Once I did I found that she was truly a child of the economic reforms, at once the beneficiary and the victim of a wealth of shifting and haphazard policies that repeatedly threw her life awry. This discrepant finding prodded me to wonder: Is she a victim and if yes, what does victimhood connote to her? What does it prevent, but also position and enable, her to do?

As for me, I see Zheng as an emblem of the core conundrum of the economic reforms, a symbol of the paradoxes inherent in the state's relation to its own control system: While loosening old strictures released swells of erstwhile sowers into the cities, winning the privilege of urban residence proved far from the solution to all their ills. For structural discrimination met them at the gates, as Zheng's experiences reveal all too well.

Her narrative lends several other insights and lessons, as well. One is of the mutual manipulation intertwining Zheng and the government attempting to manage her. On occasion the issue of who controls (or who endeavors to control) whom, who molds (or strives to mold) whom. Given Zheng's outrage and cunning, there is sometimes the scent of a draw. Another is the theme of nostalgia for a misremembered past, a recital of justice forfeited. Whence come these values, these made-over memories? Is it the nostalgia itself that breeds the feeling of rights wronged, or instead the notion of present injustices sustained that harkens back to a different yesteryear? And the third precept for the transcriber is the role of fabrication, irreconcilable inconsistencies. Could it be that the mind of the recounter is so clouded by insult and grievance as to deceive itself? Zheng's presentation seems, periodically, to slip between fable and fancy as she struggles to retrieve her past.

Throughout all her travails and in rather regular brushes with state agents, there is a theme that crops up in Zheng's autobiographical account with some regularity: she insists on fighting for what she wants, even if she knows her plans counter the law or

current regulations. Mostly, she takes it upon herself to live by her own lights, to the extent that circumstances--even if not the law--permit. When, intermittently, she has to suffer for this, she brims with bitterness against injustice. Her constant refrain is the unfairness of officialdom and the maltreatment she has wrongly endured. I had never before pursued the puzzle of whence her conception of her own rights and deserts derived. Zheng Erji's own telling of her tale uncovered some of the root of her conviction that she deserves treatment that is righteous. I proceed to relate her life to date, as she herself would have it told.

As her autobiography commences, Zheng was born in December 1959 during the Great Leap Forward, in a rural area outside Wuhan by an hour or two. Her family had been labeled as safe "poor peasant" in an earlier era. But, as bad luck would have it, during the "Four Cleans Movement" of the early 1960's, her father's brother piloted a ship and earned high wages. As a result, the family as a whole was peremptorily converted to the unfortunate category of "rich peasant," certainly spelling hardship to follow. This first bit of inequity took place when the local leader instigated an investigation expressly aimed at reversing the family's label, perhaps from spite or envy.

For, Zheng avers, at that time, the family was still rather illustrious locally. For instance, Yin Zhentao, now a Vice Mayor of Wuhan, was vice director of a company under her brother's command when her brother was serving as a *lian zhang* [company commander] in the army. Later, however, this brother became a teacher and suffered attacks during the Cultural Revolution. He even became ill from being beaten, and was sent to perform physical labor. Some people, jealous of his ability, falsely charged that he had written a sentence attacking Mao. Here was the second injustice to befall her family. Zheng's lingering fondness for the past, an emotion that crops up later on in her telling, appears to have overwritten those Mao-era manufactured offenses.

In general, Zheng bemoaned, local officials disliked her parents, and the ordinary people simply followed the leaders. Perhaps this was connected to the fact that her

grandfather had been in the leather business before 1949. According to her account, this man was killed by a cow cart and his business had subsequently collapsed. At any rate, Zheng attributed the family's difficulties in part to the fact that back at that time, people didn't speak honestly [*qiushi*], unlike today. The upshot was that her family became a marginalized one in the mid-1960s, as Zheng was growing up.

But despite these discriminatory slights, Zheng managed to launch herself onto a promising path at a young age, attending senior high, and even graduating (after five years of primary school, two years of junior high, and three years of high school). Of the six children in her natal family, she was the fifth in birth order but the only one to graduate from high school, which she did in 1975 (the family was unable to afford to send the others to school, all of whom had to go out to work instead). Sadly, her older sister, a very capable person, missed out on this opportunity of obtaining a higher education. Because of the manmade political "problems" in the family, this sister was also unable to find a husband.

As for Zheng herself, when Mao Zedong died, she, like many millions, whether forsaken or favored under his dominion, felt very sad. She believed "he was the state leader and had merit, had made contributions," even while she admitted that the Cultural Revolution was his "greatest mistake." Nonetheless, it appeared that her own situation was reasonably good despite the bias against her relatives. Her first stint of employment was in a production brigade [*shengchandu*], where she stayed for four years. Her pay could amount to as high as 36 *yuan* per month when she worked well. Zheng was content to see men earning more money than she and believed this to be proper, since the men worked more, and everyone was satisfied with that system, as Zheng recalls it. Overall, she reminisced, most people experienced the system as okay. People were simple then and "didn't have many opinions. If they could eat, things were all right, and everyone worked together." Could it be that this experience instilled in Zheng the notion that people who labored hard and did what was expected of

them should receive appropriate treatment? But while this work was fair, she judged, and the work points people received were considered appropriate--because people discussed each other's pay together, still, Zheng came to a point at which she did not want to continue to work in the fields any longer. She found it tiring, dirty, and heavy labor, and so she decided she would prefer to work in a factory if the opportunity should arise.

Then, in 1980 or 1981, her chance arrived. The production brigade set up a shoe factory. The conditions for obtaining employment in this venture were simple: it was necessary only that a person be young and that s/he give over 500 *yuan* to the leaders. Luckily for Zheng, a new local ruling about that time held that each family could send one person to labor in that plant, and, presumably because of her more extensive educational background among the members of the Zheng family, that one was she. Somehow Zheng had amassed a personal pot of savings from her earnings in the brigade, and she was able to put out the required sum, along with some help from her family. At that time, the government had begun to encourage people to do some business and she even started to dream of becoming the factory's boss one day. But being aware that a factory could collapse [*kua*, go bankrupt] at any time, and that being a farmer was ultimately "no good" [*buxing*] Zheng resolved to master a skill so she "wouldn't go hungry in the future."

Thus Zheng began to study shoemaking. Her diligence paid off. In just three months of learning the trade, she was permitted to do some part-time work in the plant, even as she continued her efforts in the fields. Gaining this position surely also had something to do with her father's brother personal relations. This was a man who had been a university student in the 1940s and later an engineer and vice manager in charge of inspection in Wuhan's No. One Shoe Factory. Just around that time, he had been invited back to the countryside to serve as an adviser to and to locate raw materials for the factory's production, once the brigade had decided to build the factory.

For this man had access to sales channels, experience, and connections with places where the necessary materials could be acquired. With time and through diligence and aptitude, Zheng did come near to achieving her goal by becoming a manager in that factory.

At this point, an armyman requested Zheng's hand in marriage. This was a person with a "suburban" household registration, which is a higher form of non-urban registration, superior to the ordinary rural registration that she herself possessed. Though she truly cared for this fellow, several obstacles intervened. For one thing, Zheng was too busy working to consider the proposition, and there was no one who could replace her at her job. But there was another, second and more weighty angle to her refusal: She considered his status--as a driver in the army--too elevated as compared with her own peasant ranking. She worried that, "Should the factory close down, who would she be? Just a peasant and, married to someone of superior status, people would look down on them."

Following this wrenching choice, yet still moving along the upward-reaching trajectory she had been climbing throughout her life, Zheng came to Wuhan city in 1983. There she was set to take a position in a small-scale private factory. She had decided on her own that she wanted to study in the city, where there were more chances to get a job. Indeed, at that point she aspired to open her own factory, earn money, and develop her talents. She therefore called on an uncle--a peasant man who had been an apprentice in Wuhan in the 1940's--who was by then an employee of the city's No. One Shoe Factory, and he helped her to find a workpost. This man had been recruited into a state-owned factory in the 1950s because he had acquired a skill, such that by the 1980s he had sufficient seniority to bring his niece into the enterprise.

Once in town, Zheng lived in the home of a married sister, riding by bus to work every day. This arrangement continued for more than a year. But with time, the business in the shop was so poor that she chose to leave, moving into yet another

private factory through an introduction from the first one. There she was able to reside in a dorm and to labor along with some 30 other workers. Most of her co-workers were other people from the countryside.

One of these co-workers introduced her to Qi Dongfeng, who was to become her future husband. While she did not take to him and, though during courting they often quarreled, she felt that she had to get married to satisfy society's customs. Indeed, Qi threatened to gossip about her [*shuo tade huaihua*] if she refused to marry him, so she decided she had no choice. From the start she considered their personalities incompatible, but she knew no other possible suitors, and by that time, was already nearing 28 years of age.

One seeming benefit of this union was that her marriage did enable her to transfer her employment to her husband's factory, the state-owned No. One Shoe factory of Wuhan. But because of her rural household registration, her job status was only that of "temporary worker" [*linshigong*]. Still, Zheng was pleased to land such an opportunity because the factory was thriving at the time. It was her poor luck however, to fail to squeeze into the small group of people who benefited from a new preferential policy [*youhui zhengce*] that allowed for a change in household registration status on the basis of being related--in her case married to--an urbanite.

The next year, 1989, Qi Yachuan, her first son, was born. When he was just a year and a half old, Zheng returned to the countryside to register his household status. Somehow along the way an accident occurred in which some broken glass damaged his eye, and the only hospital available was of poor quality, ill-equipped to rescue his sight. Thenceforth, he has classified as a "handicapped person" [*canji renyuan*], able to see in only one eye.

From that time onward, Zheng's fortune seemed to switch course and tumble downhill. She became pregnant again in 1991, just three years after her first pregnancy, in accord, she believed, with the policy that dictated that if the first child

were deformed or injured in a serious way, a second birth would be allowed. But her factory discovered her pregnant condition before she had completed the proper procedures for gaining official permission for the birth. As a result, the firm's clinic refused to give her the necessary certificate stating that Yachuan was disabled. The outcome was that, at the end of December 1991, two months before second child Qi Yaxiang was delivered, his father was promptly fired from his job. This was a pivotal event in the saga of the family, after which abject poverty descended rapidly. The factory cut Mr. Qi Dongfeng off with nothing--no recompense, no medical care, no funds for heating in winter, no bonus. And an insurance company only provided a one-time payment of 220 *yuan* in compensation for the medical treatment necessitated by Qi Yachuan's accident.

Subsequently Qi sold fruit to support his family, and at first was able to earn a sufficient sum because so few people had been laid off at that time. Mrs. Zheng repaired and made shoes at home and had stores sell the shoes she turned out. Business was still easy to conduct in 1992 and 1993. But soon the government forced the couple to stop their work on the grounds that they were improperly operating on the street. They were then compelled to pay 1,300 *yuan* per quarter in taxes and management fees, and were prohibited from selling if they could not pay this amount. With the rate of exactions so high, "people," Zheng admitted (presumably quite possibly including Qi and Zheng) sometimes simply withheld payment.

Around 1995, the government absolutely prevented the two of them from doing any business at all. As his wife related their history, Mr. Qi, hanging around in the room eavesdropping, piped in at this point that by then he had "become very exhausted and worried about his future, was under a lot of pressure, and felt he had been wronged, that the state policy on having just one child was too harsh." The factory soon thereafter went out of business, whereupon it gave its other former workers some money, but offered none to Mr. Qi. And yet, for years before, he had worked very hard

in the factory and had many done things to help out, he alleged, all in the hopes of getting Mrs. Zheng's household registration changed.

After selling fruit, the couple marketed vegetables and served breakfast on the street. When harassed by local officials, they would stop for a day or two or even for a couple of weeks and then resume their business. Sometimes they would change the products they sold or borrow money from relatives when straits became dire. At one point officials would not let Qi Dongfeng manage a stall of any kind. According to his account, in response to this injustice he blocked the car of an official, claiming that he had to trade to maintain the livelihood of his family. During those days, the district [*qu*]-level industrial-commercial bureau, public security, tax bureau, city management bureau, and the transport and environment offices united to form a general management unit, and its officers were exceedingly rude. They knocked Qi's booth over and took him to the river. Though Qi reported the incident to the "upper levels" [*shangji*] (probably the city government), everyone refused to provide any help. "They violated my human rights," he charged as we chatted. These setbacks drove Qi to feel totally unable to support his family, leading him to swallow a dose of sleeping pills, with the intent of demonstrating to the government and society that he had been wronged. The hospital saved him, however.

Mrs. Zheng persists to this day in entertaining a conviction that she would have managed to have her two children and preserve her and her husband's jobs if only she had possessed an urban *hukou*. Besides, even without the *hukou*, some could have connived to persuade local bureaucrats, but Qi and Zheng were too poor to bribe officials. Anyway, Zheng reasoned, by the time of her second pregnancy Zheng was already over 30 years old, so how could she have waited to have another child until her *hukou* would be changed? Had she obeyed regulations, she would have had to wait four years before having a second baby, even had the first one been properly

recognized as disabled. Once again we find Zheng Erji reformulating wrongful regulations, turning them into rules she felt were appropriate ones for her to follow.

As things stood, Zheng had difficulty proving the disability of Yachuan, the first boy. The issue here was that her husband's factory had failed to take the record of Yachuan's disability from the hospital that had treated him, and the absence of this document placed a serious roadblock in the way of the family's finding any redress. Given that first slight, the factory did not apply for the family to get permission for a second pregnancy. Mrs. Zheng presumes that the factory leaders were well aware that they had made a mistake in their handling of her situation and were therefore careful not to give the family any evidence that could be used against the firm. Here again we see Zheng rightfully reasoning that the laws or policies in question were fundamentally unfair and that, accordingly, she should be allowed to transgress them.

Another instance of Zheng's tough-minded struggles for her rights occurred when Qi Yachuan, the first boy, was in second grade, in 1996. This was the period when the government was making it impossible for the family to earn a living. Thus, combined with the rising school fees that were one product of the state's market reforms, Yachuan was unable to go to school for a time because the family lacked the funds to pay his *jiedufei* [education fees]. For an awful period of 20 days there was no way he could enter the school.

At this juncture, Zheng ran everywhere in the city to find help, beginning with the city's association for the disabled and even, finally, approaching those in charge of primary education at the city-level bureau of education. In her pleas, she cried out that the boy was disabled and the family too poor to finance his learning. Finally her entreaties succeeded and she managed to get the bureau leaders to present her with a certificate to be carried to the school, stating that according to regulations some of the fees should be reduced. Some time later, when Zheng heard of a fellowship of 200 *yuan* per year, given by a wealthy man in Hong Kong for poor students, she

manoeuvred to have the school recommend Qi Yachuan for the funds, because his grades were good and his family destitute. In the autumn of 2003, when Yachuan could not attend school because of mental illness, Zheng managed to get the scholarship transferred to Qi Yaxiang, son number two.

In 1999 the government devised a new provision: that children holding a rural *hukou* whose father belonged to the category of "urban staff or worker" [*zhigong*] could switch their registration to an urban one. Zheng learned about this new policy at a meeting held by her street and resident committee leaders, a gathering held specifically to notify affected people about the change. By early 2002 Zheng had been married a sufficiently lengthy period to earn the urban *hukou* for herself as well, under the new policy. But Qi Dongfeng's status as a *zhigong* had been negated with the birth of Qi Yaxiang in 1992. Nonetheless, Zheng somehow was able to achieve the change a year later, with the assent of the street level [*jiedao*] public security, since some officials there knew about the troubles of Zheng and her children. The great benefit of this was that, henceforth, the boys were no longer required to pay the extra school fees *demanded of peasant children who wished to acquire an urban education*.

Moreover, once endowed with the urban hukou, the family became eligible for the city's "minimum livelihood guarantee" [zuidi shenghuo biaojun, termed the dibao, for short] in 1999, a benefit directed just at urbanites. The granting of city registration also might help the parents in finding jobs one day (though it surely has not yet), and should cease the discrimination they have suffered. Perhaps most important, the family thereafter "felt at peace" (at least on this account), having developed a sense of "equilibrium in their hearts" [xinli pingheng]. "People are people," Zheng affirmed: "Wo shi ren, wei shenma bu gen bieren yiyang?" [I'm a person, why shouldn't I be the same as other people?], she demanded.

A few years later, district officials forbade Zheng from repairing shoes on the sidewalk. Occasionally there were periods when the air was sufficiently clear for her to

perform her work--but other times when it has not been. It is the job of the city management bureau [*chengguan*] to notify her when it is permitted to work outside and when it is not. But an unexpected blow fell in April 2003, when, in the name of "urban renewal" and "city beautification"--and for other lofty "modern" goals that go with the economic reforms--such as sanitation and cleanliness--the city summarily demolished the tiny, shoddy jerry-built workshop Zheng had had constructed for herself, tarring it with the title of "illegal construction." And once the officials had termed the shack "illegal," there was no need to offer any compensation for its destruction. But the intractable Zheng Erji soon devised a plan to get the shack rebuilt...if only I would supply the funds. When I offered to try to get a city official to provide administrative assistance, she demurred in these words: "As an ordinary person I can carry out this unlawful venture, but no official could get away with it."

Meanwhile, Qi Yachuan suddenly began to exhibit symptoms of mental illness, probably schizophrenia, as mentioned above. Zheng considered his poor mental health a direct result of the extreme pressure the present, reform-era high achievement-oriented, hyper-competitive educational system places upon young people. And, indeed, his illness could well have accrued from the pressures facing the family, an offshoot, in turn, of the severe labor market and livelihood difficulties confronting the family, a fate that has befallen many in the course of China's marketization.² But

²**According to Kuai Lehao, "Meiyou naru dibao di 'huise qunti'" [The 'grey mass' that hasn't entered into the minimum livelihood system] Nanfang choumo [Southern Weekend], March 29, 2002, "Newspapers point out, due to the competition in the labor market getting more and more intense, the pressure on laid-off and unemployed workers and a series of social problems increases the spiritual stress on urban residents and leads to an increase in their mental illness.**

against all odds, Zheng was nonetheless determined to find a way to get Yachuan into a better school, an objective now attained. After her persistent pleading with a district-level educational official, Yachuan's present education at a superior school is totally cost-free. In the past few years, the *dibao* that the family receives from the city government, as of the year 2004 in the amount of some 400 yuan per month for the family of four, has improved their lives. But the amount--which comes to under 100 renminbi, or just about \$12.50 US, per month per person--is insufficient. Without the help she got from her appeals to me, they family would have starved to death by now, she avers.

Zheng Erji insists on breaking the law--or contravening the rules in small and not so small ways--when she determines that she must; and she almost always suffers the consequences. Headstrong and hot-tempered, she is possessed of a sense of fairness--perhaps a mix of embellished dreams of the past and the socialist slogans from the days of Mao--and she is always ready to pursue any plan she feels is right, regardless of regulations. She repeatedly persists against the odds, having a second child without formal permission, selling on the street when officials say not to, and rebuilding an illegal workplace after the first one was destroyed. And her natural grit buoys her up no matter the result such that she is always furious when things go wrong. The economic reforms have placed her in the city, but, once positioned there, she is not content to rest in quiet, nor passively to receive the injuries and persecutions visited upon peasants settled in town. Her few triumphs over officialdom are a fair match for her troubles.