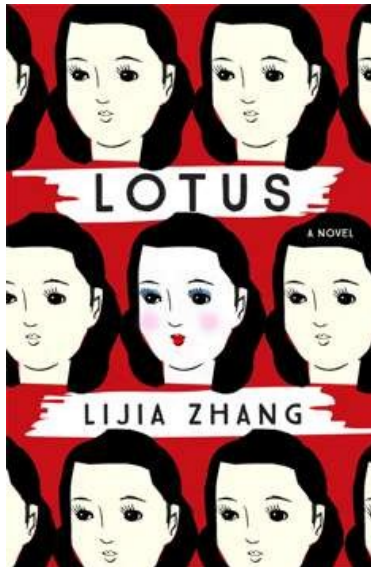


**4 Jan 2017 - Money, sex, guanxi: Lijia Zhang's timely novel about prostitution and the new China doesn't deliver on all its promises**

<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/books/article/2059269/money-sex-guanxi-lijia-zhangs-timely-novel-about>

Books Reviews Mike Cormack

Zhang deserves praise for striving to bring to light the seedy demimonde of Shenzhen, the epitome of China's breakneck transformation into an urban society. Unfortunately, her ambition outstrips her ability



Lotus: A Novel  
by Lijia Zhang  
Henry Holt & Co.

Those of us of a certain vintage, perhaps now greying at the temples, may remember Robin Williams teaching English in the film *Dead Poets Society*. In his first lesson, one of his students reads aloud an "Introduction to Poetry", where (fictional) critic Dr J Evans Pritchard explains how to assess the value of poetry, by multiplying the technical perfection by the importance of the theme. This attempt to measure the value of literature came to mind when reading Lijia Zhang's novel *Lotus*. Having gained a reputation through her book "Socialism is Great!", her 2008 memoir of going to work in a factory aged 16 and her sub-sequent sexual, intellectual and political awakening in the ferment of 1980s China, Zhang has now moved into fiction. We follow the eponymous Lotus, a Sichuan native who works in a Shenzhen massage parlour as a ji, a prostitute, and her efforts to make something of her life.

Most pleasing about Zhang's novel are her subject and setting. She strives to bring to light the seedy back streets and struggling itinerant workers who have undertaken the world's largest urban migration. There is a critique of the system wherein millions leave rural roots to become hukou-less wage slaves who keep the wheels of commerce turning. We can see how loaded against them the system is, and how, in a deeply transactional society, the only thing that matters is what they bring to the table – whether it's money, sex or guanxi.

Shenzhen, where new industries, new urbanites and new capital combine so alluringly, so rootlessly and so ruthlessly, is an appropriate setting for this tumultuous transitional period. Zhang, however, as yet lacks the literary chops to make her novel worthy of her ambition. She attempts a poetic style, perhaps with echoes of the elegance of Nabokov or, in its close attention to the details of the natural world, D.H. Lawrence, counterpointed with pungent phrases

and the curses of her characters. But she rarely achieves the beauty she aims for, instead overwriting, and often telling rather than showing. A few examples:

“He pounced on her, like a hungry dog jumping on a piece of juicy meat, and planted more wet kisses on her face and neck.”

“Funny Eye stopped inches away from Lotus, radiating his distinctive smell, a mixture of cologne and aromatic tobacco.”

“Suddenly he felt light breaking in his cloudy mind.”

“The massive waiting room was packed with people and filled with the smells of spicy pot noodles, smoke and sour human sweat.”

Adjectives are always bolted on to their associated nouns: jolts are always sudden, headaches are pounding, and couples live in domestic – you guessed it – bliss.



A massage parlour, outside a hotel in the town of Wushan. Picture: AFP

Similarly, like Lawrence, Zhang occasionally attempts to use her descriptions of nature and atmosphere to symbolise the feelings of the characters. This may endear the book to some, but other readers will find the imagery hackneyed.

According to “Socialism is Great!”, Nanjing-born Zhang spent political study sessions reading a copy of *Jane Eyre* hidden inside a *People’s Daily*, in order to learn English and in a wry comment on the usefulness of these meetings. But one longs for the judicious brevity of, say, Chuck Palahniuk, rather than a Victorian sensibility that can seem rather too much in love with novel-writing.

Two further weaknesses are connected: the book’s plot and Zhang’s characterisation of photographer Hu Binbing. While the book is ostensibly about Shenzhen’s sex industry, it can more accurately be classed as a romantic novel, with Lotus choosing from a range of suitors – one merely offering the position of a kept mistress, but another marriage – and them suffering misunderstandings and contre-temps blocking their way to happiness. (The ending may not follow the template precisely, but the underlying pattern is clear.)

The use of education as a redemptive, status-enhancing motif likewise feels unimaginative, and there is little exploration of the red-light world beyond Lotus’ massage parlour. Regarding character, we see Hu spending considerable time around attractive women, but the man seems to have only some meek and dutiful sense of romantic longing. He is a man entirely without lust.



A suspected prostitute at a hotel room during a police raid, as part of plans to crackdown on prostitution, in Dongguan, Guangdong province, in February, 2014. Picture: Reuters

While Zhang tries to obscure this by having the other characters nickname him Monk, it feels as though an essential part is missing from the character. Male sexuality in the novel is either brutish or monkish. This may be a function of the setting, but in a novel of sexual empathy, this feels like a structural flaw.

These flaws, however, might not, in the end, matter that much. If I sound severe, it is because Lotus displays considerable potential. To return to *Dead Poets Society*: Williams' inspirational teacher gets his students to rip out the introduction by Pritchard, declaring: "Armies of academics going forward, measuring poetry. No, we will not have that here!" Empathy, heart, and passion matter more to the general reader.

Lotus may occasionally stumble in the telling, but it is richly humane and has pointed, thematic intent. It articulates an aspect of China that needs to be represented, and upon which official media have been rendered mute. If Zhang can master contemporary storytelling – then we'll really be able to take notice.

In the meantime, Lotus is notable more for its promise than for what it delivers.