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## **The Sad Story of Zheng Erji, Who Landed in the City Through Favors Bestowed by Reform-Era Policies . . . But Rewrote the Rules While Suffering Wrongs, Once There**

Dorothy Solinger

One typically sizzling summer afternoon in Wuhan in early September 1998, I strolled the streets in need of custom-made sandals. I had been disappointed in Hong Kong, where shops specializing in that trade no longer could be found, and I wondered if that old business might have relocated—like so many others—to the Mainland.\* About to give up hope, I noticed a small, eager Chinese woman crouching by the curb, displaying a small signboard that announced that she was there to repair shoes. That was the beginning of my acquaintance with Zheng Erji. 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 was soon at work on my first two pairs of custom hand-made sandals.

I didn’t give the encounter much thought, 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 Mrs. Zheng out again. I figured she would likely still be installed in the same place, and sure enough she was. I was greeted as if I were a once-lost god, returned to bless her life, which struck me as a bit odd. It was only a few days later that I learned why I received the welcome I did. It happened that the very day I returned was also the day her two boys’ school bills were due. Had I not arrived with cash in hand for more homemade shoes, her children would not have been able to register for that semester. She rapidly grasped the opportunity of having a foreign client who seemed interested in her situation, begging me to

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\*From interviews, January 11 and 12, 2004, Wuhan.

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 could not afford to raise that boy.

I was troubled by this plea but felt utterly incapable of complying with her request. At the same time, she *had* mentioned being short about 300 yuan per month. As I tossed in my hotel bed that night, pondering what I might be able to do to help, it occurred to me that it might be possible to send her a monthly check to make up the shortfall—about US\$40. By the time this solution hit me, it was still afternoon in Chicago. So I telephoned a colleague who was raised in China and asked if such a thing could be done. When he assured me it could, I resolved there and then to adopt this family (informally, I should add). So since that late summer night in 1999, 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 has become my little sister, and I her *dajie* [big sister].

The basic outline of her life, which she related to me on one of our first encounters, was that because of the various forms of policy liberalization linked to economic reform, along with her own mettle, she was able to leave her suburban home on the outskirts of Wuhan, where she had existed with a *nongmin hukou* [rural household registration], to come to the city and eventually find work at a state-owned shoemaking factory. There she met her future husband, and they married in 1987. In 1989 the two gave birth to a boy, who through some awful accident (too terrible to reveal to me even after nearly five years of friendship) lost sight in one eye at about 19 months. Mrs. Zheng keeps herself relatively well informed about government policy, and she knew that if a first child is disabled, a second is permitted.

Quite unfortunately for the family, son number two appeared in early 1992, before the necessary permission for his presence on earth had been granted. The factory employing Mrs. Zheng and her husband precipitously dismissed them both. The shock of such treatment—years before the policy of *xiagang* (laying off) had been enunciated and popularized—instantly turned Mr. Zheng into a social outcast, provoking an emotional breakdown. According to Mrs. Zheng’s account, supporting the family became her responsibility alone; she considers her husband unable to hold down

a steady job. Though she has managed from time to time to find scholarship funds for her boys, her life has become a constant struggle.

Zheng has always adapted to her fate and dreamed ambitiously. The openness of the economy during the reforms allowed her to move into Wuhan and marry an urban man; it also allows the couple to try to earn a living, even after their original source of sustenance was denied them by the one-child policy. But the arbitrariness of officialdom has beset Zheng and her family time and again, from the days of Mao Zedong to the present. Despite the wrongs visited upon her, she maintains a persistent sense of what is fair and she continues to feel that 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 her down and hear her entire story until January 2004. Once I did I found the extent to which she truly was a child of the reforms, both beneficiary and victim of a wealth of shifting and haphazard policies that repeatedly threw her life awry.

Throughout all her travails and in rather regular brushes with state agents, one theme continually crops up: she insists on fighting for what she wants, even if she knows it's against the law or current regulations. Mostly, she takes it upon herself to live by her own lights, to the extent that circumstances (if not the law) permit. When she has to suffer for it she brims with rage against injustice. Her constant refrain is the unfairness of officialdom and the maltreatment she has wrongly suffered. 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 convictions.



Zheng was born in December 1959 during the Great Leap Forward, in a rural area an hour or two outside Wuhan. Her family had been safely labeled "poor peasant" in an earlier era. But, as bad luck would have it, during the "Four Cleans" movement of the early 1960s (a campaign aimed at attacking cadre corruption in the countryside), her father's brother piloted a ship and earned high wages. As a result,

the family as a whole was peremptorily reclassified “rich peasant.” This first bit of abuse resulted from an investigation, launched by the local leader, aimed at changing the family’s class label. 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 Zheng’s brother when her brother was serving as a *lianzhang* [company commander] in the army. Later, however, this brother became a teacher and was attacked and beaten during the Cultural Revolution, the second injustice to befall Zheng’s family. He fell ill from the beatings and was sent to perform physical labor. Some people, jealous of his ability, falsely charged that he had written a sentence attacking Mao.

In general, Zheng bemoaned, local officials didn’t like her parents, and 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, the grandfather was killed by an oxcart and his business subsequently collapsed. At any rate, Zheng attributed the family’s difficulties in part to her contention that in those days, people didn’t speak honestly [*qiushi*], unlike today. The upshot was that by the mid-1960s, when Zheng was growing up, her family had been marginalized.

Zheng nonetheless managed to launch herself onto a promising path at a young age, attending senior high and even graduating in 1975 (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. The family could not afford to send the others to school, so they went out to work instead. Sadly, her very capable older sister missed out on the opportunity for higher education, and because of the family’s problems with the community she was also unable to find a husband.

As for Zheng herself, when Mao Zedong died, she felt very sad. She believed that as the state leader he had merit and had made contributions, even as 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 job was in a production brigade [*shengchandu*], where she stayed for four years. Her pay could amount to as much as 36 yuan per month when she worked well. Zheng was content to see men

earning more money than she and felt it to be proper, since they worked more. Like her, she reminisced, overall most people found the system 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? Although the work was fair, and people felt that their work points were fair (because they discussed their pay with one another), still Zheng came to the point at which she no longer wanted to do the tiring, dirty, heavy labor that fieldwork required. 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 were only that a person be young and hand over 500 yuan to the leaders. A new local ruling held that each family could send one person to work there and, presumably because of her superior education, Erji was chosen from the Zheng family. Somehow she had amassed a personal pot of savings from her earnings in the brigade, and with some help from her family she was able to put out the required sum. 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 go bankrupt at any time, and that being a farmer was ultimately "no good," Zheng determined to master a skill so she wouldn't go hungry in the future.

So Zheng began to study shoemaking, and after three months she was permitted to do some part-time work in the plant, even as she continued her efforts in the fields. Gaining the position surely also had something to do with the fact that her father's brother—who had been a university student in the 1940s and later an engineer and vice manager in charge of inspection at Wuhan's No. One Shoe Factory—had been invited back to the countryside to serve as an adviser to and to locate raw materials for the factory. In time and through diligence and aptitude, Zheng became a manager in the factory.

Around this time, an army man asked her to marry him. It was an attractive offer partly because he had a "suburban" household registration, a form of nonurban registration superior to her ordinary rural registration. Although she liked him, several obstacles

intervened. For one thing, she was too busy working to consider the proposition, and there was no one who could replace her at her job. But there was another, more weighty reason for her refusal: She considered his status—as a driver in the army—too elevated compared to her own peasant ranking. She worried, “Should the factory close down, who would I be? Just a peasant and, married to someone of superior status, people would look down on us.”

Still moving along the upward trajectory she had been climbing throughout her life, Zheng came to Wuhan city in 1983 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 abilities. She therefore called on an uncle—a peasant who had been an apprentice in Wuhan in the 1940s who was by then an employee of the city’s No. One Shoe Factory—and he helped her to find a work post. This uncle had been recruited into a state-owned factory in the 1950s because he had acquired a skill, and by the 1980s he had sufficient seniority to bring his niece into the enterprise.

Once in town, Zheng lived in the home of her married sister, riding by bus to work every day. This went on for more than a year. But in time, the business in the shop was so poor that she left, moving to yet another private factory through an introduction from the first one. There she worked and lived in a dorm alongside 30 other workers, most of whom were also from the countryside.

One of her co-workers introduced her to Qi Dongfeng, her future husband. Although she did not take to him and they often quarreled during their courtship, she felt that she had to get married to satisfy society’s customs. Indeed, he 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, at nearly 28, felt that she could wait no longer.

One seeming benefit of Zheng’s marriage to Qi was that it enabled her to transfer to her husband’s factory, the state-owned No. One Shoe Factory of Wuhan. Because of her rural household registration, however, her job was classified only as “temporary worker” [*linshigong*]. Still, she was pleased to land such an opportunity because the factory was thriving. At this time a new preferential

policy [*youhui zhengce*] allowed some people to change their registration status if they were related (including, as in Zheng's case, married) to an urbanite. The quota for this opportunity was very small, however, and it was Zheng's poor luck that she was not selected. The next year, 1989, she gave birth to Qi Yachuan, her first son. When he was about 18 months old, Zheng returned to the countryside to register his household identity. Somehow along the way an accident occurred in which some broken glass damaged his eye, and the only hospital available to him was of poor quality and ill-equipped to rescue his sight.

From that point on, Zheng's fortune seemed to tumble. She became pregnant again in 1991, following the policy that dictated that if a first child was injured in a serious way, a second birth would be allowed. But her factory discovered her condition before she had managed to complete 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, and at the end of December 1991, two months before Qi Yaxiang was born, Zheng's husband was swiftly fired. This was a pivotal event in the family's saga, and abject poverty descended upon them rapidly. The factory cut off Qi Dongfeng with nothing—no recompense, no medical care, no funds for winter heat, no bonus. And an insurance company provided only a one-time payment of 220 yuan for Qi Yachuan's accident.

Qi began to sell fruit to support his family, and at first he 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. Soon, however, the government forced the couple to stop their work because they were operating on the street. They were then compelled to pay 1,300 yuan quarterly in taxes and management fees, and were prohibited from selling if they could not pay. Zheng explained that with the rate so high, "people" (presumably—quite possibly—including herself and her husband) sometimes simply withheld payment.

Around 1995, the government absolutely prevented the couple from doing any business at all. At this point in our conversation, Mr. Qi, who had been hanging around in the room eavesdropping, piped in 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 one-child policy was too harsh. Eventually the factory went out of business and paid out to other former workers, but Mr. Qi received nothing. And yet he had worked very hard in the factory and had done things to help out, all in the hopes of getting Mrs. Zheng's household registration changed.

The couple then sold 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. Sometimes they would change the products they sold or borrow money from relatives when straits became dire. At one point officials forbade Qi Dongfeng from managing a stall of any kind. According to his account, in response to this injustice he blocked an official's car, alleging that he had to do business to maintain the livelihood of his family. During those days, the district [*qu*] 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 his booth over and took him to the river. Though Qi reported the incident to the upper levels (presumably the city government), everyone refused to provide any help. "They violated my human rights," he charged. At that point, Qi saw that he was unable to support his family so he took a dose of sleeping pills to show government and society that he had been wronged. The hospital saved him, however.

Mrs. Zheng persists to this day in feeling that she might have managed to have her two kids and preserve her and her husband's jobs if only she had had an urban *hukou* [registration]. As things stood, though, the *hukou* policy prevented her from getting away with having two kids. And Qi and Zheng were too poor to bribe officials, as other people would probably have done in these circumstances. In any event, Zheng reasoned, by the time of her second pregnancy she was already over 30, so how could she have waited for her *hukou* to be changed to have another child? Had she obeyed regulations, she would have had to wait four years before having a second one, even if the first one had been properly recognized as disabled. Confronted with what she sees as wrongful regulations, Zheng rewrites them in her mind into rules she feels were appropriate for her to follow.

As things stood, Zheng had difficulty just proving Yachuan's disability. Her husband's factory failed to acquire the disability record from the hospital that had treated Yachuan, and the absence of this document placed a serious roadblock in the way of redress for the family. Without the record, the factory did not apply for permission for the family to have their second child. Mrs. Zheng presumes that the factory leaders were well aware that they had made a mistake in handling her situation and were therefore careful not to give the family any evidence that could be used against the firm. Zheng reasons, rightfully, that the laws and policies in question are fundamentally unfair, and concludes that she naturally should be allowed to transgress them.

Another instance of Zheng's tough-minded struggles for her rights occurred in 1996, when Yachuan was in second grade. The government was making it impossible for the family to earn a living. Zheng discovered that Yachuan was unable to go to school for a time because the family lacked the funds to pay the *jiedufei*.<sup>\*</sup> For an awful period of 20 days there was no way he could enter the school. Zheng ran all over the city to find help, including the city's association for the disabled and even, finally, those in charge of primary education at the city-level bureau of education. She cried out that the boy was disabled and the family was too poor to finance his learning, and managed to get the bureau leaders to give her a certificate reducing some of the requisite fees. Similarly, some time later, when Zheng heard of a fellowship of 200 yuan per year for poor students given by a wealthy man in Hong Kong, she got the school to recommend Qi Yachuan for it, because of his good grades and his family's hardship. But that grant is available only for a limited number of students and is very difficult to win. This past autumn, when Yachuan could not attend school because of mental illness, Zheng managed to get the scholarship transferred to her younger son, Qi Yaxiang.

In 1999 the government came up with 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

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<sup>\*</sup>Extra fees for "borrowed study" (i.e., attending school on a temporary basis in a school not in one's home area), demanded of peasant children receiving an urban education.

by her street and resident committee leaders, a conference held expressly to notify affected people about the change. By early 2002 Zheng had been married long enough 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 Qi Yaxiang's birth in 1992. Nonetheless, Zheng somehow managed to wrangle the change a year later, with the assent of the street-level [*jiedao*] public security, since some officials there knew about the family's troubles. Henceforth the boys were no longer required to pay the *jiedufei*.

Moreover, once endowed with the urban *hukou* the family became eligible for the *dibao* [*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*, or minimum livelihood guarantee] in 1999, a benefit directed solely to urbanites. The granting of urban 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 now "feels at peace" (at least on this account), and has a sense of "equilibrium in our 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?]

A few years ago district officials forbade Zheng from repairing shoes on the sidewalk. Over the past year or so there have been times when the air has been clear for her to work, other times not. It's up to the city management bureau [*chengguan*] to notify her when she may work outside and when she may not. In April 2003, 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." Once the officials had termed the shack "illegal," they had no need to offer any compensation for its destruction. But the intractable Zheng soon devised a plan to get it 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, her son Qi Yachuan suddenly began to exhibit symptoms of mental illness, probably schizophrenia. Zheng considered his poor mental health a direct result of the extreme

pressure the current reform-era's achievement-oriented, hypercompetitive educational system places upon young people. But against all odds, Zheng was nonetheless determined to find a way to get him 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* the family receives from the city government, now 395 yuan per month for the family of four, has improved their lives, but the amount—which comes to under 100 renminbi, or just about US\$12.50 per month per person—is insufficient. Without the help she got from her appeals to me, they'd 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 natural sense of fairness and is always ready to pursue any plan she feels is right, regardless of regulations. She repeatedly persists against the odds, whether having a second child, selling on the street, or rebuilding an illegal workplace. And she's always furious when things go wrong.