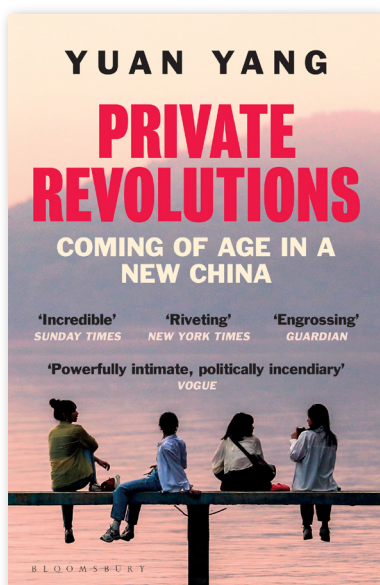


Private Revolutions

Coming of Age in a New China

by Yuan Yang



PLOT SUMMARY

This is a book about the coming of age of four women born in China in the 1980s and 1990s, in a society about to transform beyond recognition.

It is about Leiya, who wants to escape the fate of the women in her village. Still underage, she bluffs her way onto the factory floor. It is about June, who at fifteen sets what her family thinks is an impossible goal: to attend university rather than raise pigs. It is about Siyue, ranked second-to-bottom of her English class, who decides to prove her teachers wrong. And it is about Sam, who becomes convinced that the only way to change her country is to become an activist – even as the authorities slowly take her peers from the streets.

With unprecedented access to the hopes, homes, dreams and diaries of four young women over a period of six years, *Private Revolutions* lifts the veil on whose stories which often go untold, from an authentic voice we don't often hear from. At a time of rising state censorship and isolation, it unearths the identity of modern Chinese society – and through the telling, something of our own.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In her Epilogue, Yang concludes that Leiya, Dan, Siyue, June and Sam are all 'unusually accomplished idealists'. In their different experiences of China, each one of these women have had to battle challenges with access to and high competition for education, bad working conditions, disempowering cultural attitudes towards women and overarching political reforms in the race to a capitalist society that had significant impacts on their lives – from property ownership to reproductive rights and swift changes in government policy that, for instance, made Siyue's work in private tutoring extremely difficult.

Yet, in each of their stories, there is also resilience, and dedication to helping others, particularly women and families. Leiya's work in

“Eye-opening,
beautifully written
and carefully
researched,
this book traces
a moment of
transition in
China through
the lives of four
women.”

KAVITA PURI,
2025 CHAIR OF JUDGES

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Shortlist
2025

community projects aimed at empowering women and families such as The Banyan Tree Centre and the Opening Page Project, and Sam’s experience of family reading projects at Shenzhen’s Children’s Library shows a commitment among Chinese people to supporting each other during the frenzied drive to a new capitalist society that, in many cases, stripped away the structures of support that had existed under its previous communist rule.

Each woman, in her way, is an idealist in the face of significant difficulty. The China of the 1980s and 1990s operates as a vast Behemoth, dictating new ideals and policies at a frantic pace that have vast and profound impacts on people’s lives. These women combat those pressures by banding together, community organising, and sometimes – as in the case of Sam using FreeGate software, and Leiya playing hooky at the garment factory – straight up rebellion.

What we learn most from these women’s stories is the power of loving interdependence with family and friends, and, as Yang says, ‘the creative ability of humans to transform themselves, and to make possible what was previously unimaginable – particularly when in supportive, like-minded communities’.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Siyue thinks of a quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius: ‘When Heaven is about to confer a great mission on any woman, it first exercises her mind with suffering.’

The women in *Private Revolutions* all seemed to suffer in different ways during their lives in China. The challenges they faced included working in factories under difficult physical conditions; suffering sexual harassment; suffering the difficulties of applying to university and the implications of the elitism of the education system; suffering under social expectations for the behaviour of women; poverty, hunger, the restriction of aspiration for the future.

Can you relate to this sentiment, that the path to greatness is via suffering? Or is this an unnecessarily negative view – are there people who have achieved greatness without significant suffering along the way? If so, are they women? Are women’s lives generally more beset with suffering, regardless of culture and historical context, or is that too much of a generalisation?

QUESTIONS

How much did you know about China in the 1980s and 1990s before you read this book? What surprised you most in reading it?

Looking at Leiya’s work in factories, how much does her experience and the idea of factory work as being a desirable occupation align or

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contrast with our ideas about Chinese garment manufacturing – especially fast fashion – today?

Yang notes that her book is about both economic, political and personal revolutions. Are these things inextricably linked? Can we ever claim to be apolitical considering how much our individual lives are shaped by economics?

NEXT STEPS

In the book we see June's diaries as a fourteen-year-old. Did you keep a diary at that age? Even if you didn't, have a go at recreating what your fourteen-year-old self would have written in a diary. What were your interests at the time? What were you obsessed with? How would you have written and spoken? What were your hopes for the future?

Alternatively, research the significant political developments in your home country that were happening when you were a teenager. What were they? Who was in government at the time and what policies were being enacted? How did they affect you, and were you aware of how these political and economic forces affected you at the time? You might like to write about it as a personal essay, linking your experiences to the economic and political changes of the time. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yuan Yang was born in 1990 in China, where she lived with her grandparents for four years before her parents brought her to the UK. She returned to China as an adult, posted there as a correspondent for the *Financial Times*; after the mass expulsion of journalists from China in 2020, she was one of the few journalists writing in English left in the country. She moved back to the FT's London headquarters as their first China-Europe Correspondent, and in 2024 she was elected as the Labour MP for the new constituency of Earley and Woodley. She is the first ever Chinese-born MP in UK history. *Private Revolutions* is her first book.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

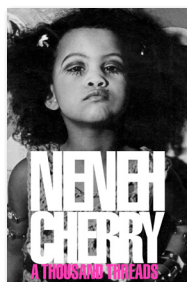
In *Leftover in China: The Women Shaping the World's Next Superpower*, Roseann Lake considers China's tense sociopolitical climate, as deeply rooted traditions, values and beliefs about sex, romance, and marriage clash with the powerful current trend toward individualism.

Nothing to Envy by Barbara Demick offers a perceptive and rare insight into the everyday lives of six residents of Chongin, North Korea's third-largest city, weaving together their stories of adversity and resilience.

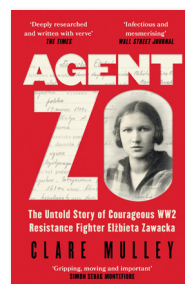
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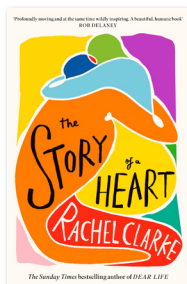
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