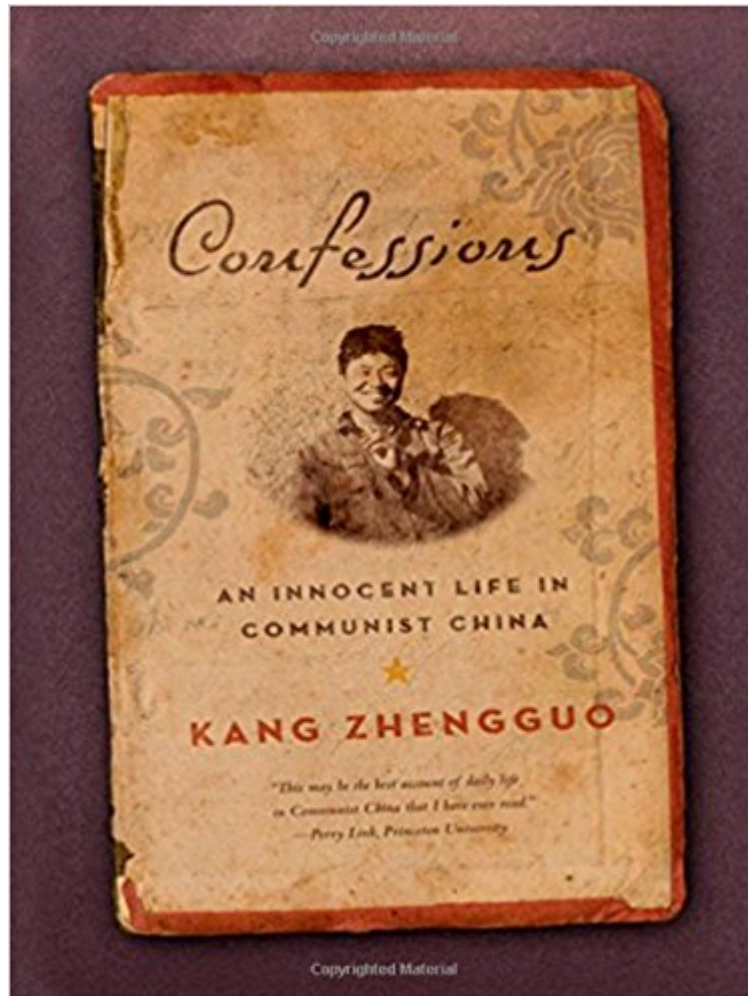




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Confessions: An Innocent Life In Communist China



Synopsis

A revealing memoir of human resilience in the face of nightmarish power. With clear vision this intimate memoir draws us into the intersections of everyday life and Communist power from the first days of "Liberation" in 1949 through the Tiananmen Square protests and after. The son of a professional family, Kang Zhengguo is a free spirit, drawn to literature. In Mao's China, these innocuous circumstances expose him at the age of twenty to a fierce struggle session, expulsion from university, and a four-year term of hard labor in Xian's Number Two Brickyard. So begins his long stay in the prison-camp system, a story of hardship and poignance, of warmth and humor in the face of cruelty. He finally escapes the Chinese gulag by forfeiting his identity: at age twenty-eight he is adopted by an aging bachelor in a peasant village, which enables him to start a new life. Rehabilitated after Mao's death, Kang finds himself still subject to the recurring nightmare of party authority. 15 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

The author of this absorbing memoir was a misfit in the most misfit-intolerant place on earth. Coming of age during the Cultural Revolution, Kang kept secret diaries, disdained the political sloganeering at his university and was sent away for requesting the suspect novel *Doctor Zhivago*—crimes that landed him a three-year prison term and resettlement in a peasant commune where the work was almost as backbreaking as in the camps. His story is a lively, intricate account of communism's panoptic police state, suffocating bureaucracy (residency permits and ration cards made moving, working and eating impossibly complex) and rabid witch hunts for

imaginary class villains, all of which only exacerbated traditional obsessions with obtaining food, housing and a spouse. But official denunciations of Kang's bad attitude weren't entirely wrong. "I treasured laziness," he writes. "I admired the work habits of carnivorous animals like lions... free to loll around all day once they had finished capturing their prey." Such profoundly unproletarian sentiments put him at odds not only with the Party but with his despairing parents and disgruntled villagers who felt he was shirking in the fields. Kang's rugged individualism takes his story beyond the usual narrative of persecution and hardship, making it an incisive, personal critique of a deeply conformist society. Photos. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Zhengguo has gained a reputation as a writer whose spirit and style were not crushed by the oppression of China's Mao years. His style is indeed vivid and fluid, running from social commentary and political analysis to inner musings and sharp observations of everyday life and the fortitude it takes to swim against an overpowering political and social tide. Zhengguo records life in China from the time of "liberation" in 1949 through the Tiananmen Square protests and later. As a student, his resistance to political oppression landed him in a brutal labor camp, where, upon release in 1965, he was presented with a bill. Zhengguo chronicles the petty use of power to control every aspect of life, such as applying for a job, a marriage license, a residence permit, or rations coupons, as well as the mindless cruelty of the prison camps. He explores the ways that the push to conformity and official notions of egalitarianism distort human interactions, and the anger and amazement of his family at his continued defiance. For readers interested in life in China under Mao as well as the literature that chronicles that period, this is a wonderful book. Bush, Vanessa

Princeton professor Perry Link says in the Introduction that "Confessions" "may be the best account of daily life in Communist China that I have ever read. It stands out .. because of the extraordinary lifelike qualities of the writing and the credibility of its account .. Hundreds of writers .. have given accounts of China during Mao's years, but nearly all use an ideological lens .. This account, in contrast, is clear eyed."As Link says, it is honest and devoid of Communist ideology, the first honest account "free of Mao" to appear out of China. The writing is superb and the characters pop out of the page. Certain scenes are anthropological in detail, such as rural peasant life, and some of the prison descriptions are, according to Link, as good as anything of its type available. Zhengguo never sacrificed his internal integrity, which made him a nail-head that attracted the notice of the Communist hammer, usually involving literature and books: Zhengguo was jailed

for three years for requesting a library copy of *Doctor Zhivago*. Zhengguo says the purpose in writing his memoirs: "I sought salvation through describing my trials and tribulations in writing. My purpose was not merely to complain but rather to salvage my dignity through honest revelations about myself and everyone who had interacted with me, whether friend or foe." Zhengguo has obvious faults, there are times the reader wonders how he could be so foolish and stubborn, but anyone who is a devotee of books and the literary life will find in Zhengguo inspiration for a dignified life and personal integrity.

Highly recommended for the reader interested in how one thoughtful young person might have survived during the madness of Mao's years. Professor Kang Zhengguo provides a well-written reaffirmation of the ultimate power of the lone individual. He, while adapting to hard circumstances, quietly strove for what was just in a time of unjustness. A harsh, deadeningly corrupt political/economic system, seemingly designed to bring out the worst in all people, is described in powerful detail.

There are many great books on life in Communist China...*Wild Swans*, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, *Mandate of Heaven*, *Iron and Silk* etc.....*Confessions* is a great addition to the field. Well translated and utterly captivating and scary. A look into the horrors of life under Mao's totalitarianism. Some guys might be put off from *Life and Death in Shanghai* or *Wild Swans* which are told from very strong female points of view....*Confessions* is from a male's point of view...I am not saying the other books are chick books and this is a guys book...but to some who might not want to read about generations of females this is a good alternative. It's a great book and I hope it reaches a wide group of readers.

Worth the price just for the 12-page vivid description, midway into the book, of what the author's wife suffered through when she was growing up in utter poverty. Maintains a rare objective look at the trials and tribulations of his life, with surprisingly scant bitterness, until just towards the very end of the book, when the author seems to stop taking it all in his stride and writes emotionally about his feelings towards the regime. I really enjoyed this; certainly a different - almost whimsical - narrative on life during this period.

Fascinating read, a book I found hard to put down!

Very interesting; I am coming from such a country and know what people were going through and what they are still going through.

So what do we know about this innocent life whose story is told across five decades? Born to city life, Zhengguo Kang is early on banished by his family to the Silent Garden of his grandparents--this to keep him from being corrupted by the "bad" kids in the neighborhood. Taking the journal his father gives him, he ensconces himself in his grandfather's library and begins his self-education, each night writing about his thoughts. Is all this foreshadow of what is to come? We never learn what is in the journals. Is it only because they are burned, or because he doesn't want to reveal himself? Does this early experience foster his emotional isolation and create the hiding place necessary for his survival? His narrative tells the brief stories of many ordinary people who are impacted by the harshness of the regime. Each story of struggle and loss is told with dispassion. His own trying experiences read like the routine of brushing one's teeth. Is he incapable of connecting with his feelings, or is he the ultimate observer? Is this book the confession of a professional confessor--who tells what needs to be said to get off, but has mastered the art of not revealing himself at all? Is it the confession of a culture that had lost its ability to feel? We'll never know for sure.

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