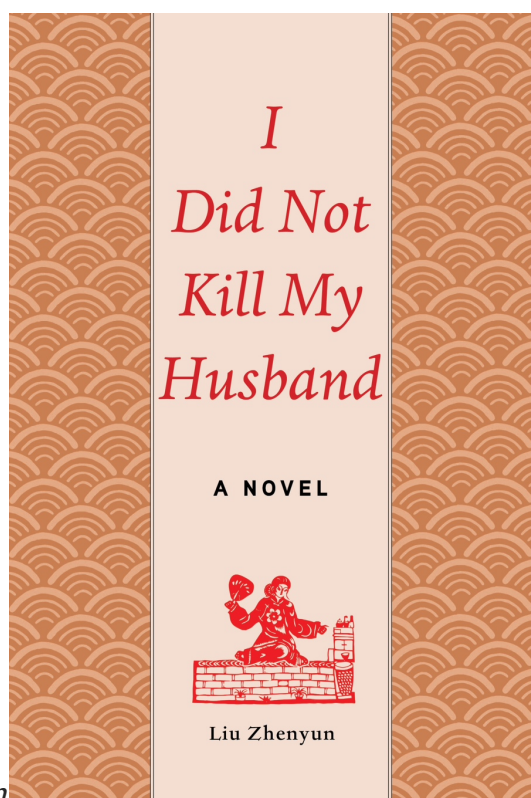


SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW | THE SHORTLIST

By MARA HVISTENDAHL NOV. 21, 2014

China

I DID NOT KILL MY HUSBAND



By Liu Zhenyun

Translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin

Arcade, \$24.95.

Government fear of chaos is omnipresent in this expertly translated political farce. Li Xuelian's elaborate plan for evading steep penalties under the one-child policy for the birth of her second child — divorce her husband, then remarry him after the baby is born — backfires when her husband marries another woman. She petitions local officials to label the divorce a sham, crashes the National People's Congress in Beijing, and ultimately causes the dismissal of several local and provincial officials. Emboldened by her success, she drags out her campaign over decades, while authorities try vainly to silence her.

Real-life petitioners are rarely so successful; many are illegally detained or abducted upon reaching Beijing. No matter. With Li Xuelian's case, Liu skillfully shows the fear of the masses that is harbored by Chinese officials. "A tiny ant hole can ruin a dike," the mayor of her unnamed city says.

Liu's writing is at turns repetitive; the narrative circles back on itself. But as he catalogs, in hilarious detail, the petty concerns of officials groveling for promotions, he gives an intimate portrait of the local politics that matter so greatly in China. One provincial mayor, he writes, "could never be blamed for callous disregard, . . . since he was off in Beijing the whole time."

Mara Hvistendahl is the author of "Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men" and a co-founder of the writers' collective Deca.

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