Senior Privy Council analyst’s life in limbo

Huiyan Zhang has lived a life of struggle. Born in 1963, she grew up amid the country’s Cultural Revolution in a family without privilege or political connections.

“Hardships, challenges and turbulence were given in life,” she says. Still, she persevered. Despite never becoming a member of the Communist Party, she was able to learn English, attend university and eventually earn a master’s degree in Shakespearean literature. From there, she became a rarity: a single, female foreign correspondent for China’s state news agency, Xinhua.

Even then, she faced adversity. Her bosses wanted her to edit stories in the agency’s Cairo bureau to prevent her from leaving with a non-Chinese person. But she fought to report on the Gulf War in 1991, gaining the respect of her Canadian husband-to-be in Kuwait.

Immigrating to Canada in 1995 where nobody recognized her degree, Ms. Zhang hung her own company, earned a master’s in business administration and became a certified management consultant. Upon being recruited to the federal public service in 2002, she quickly shot up the ranks, culminated with a position at the centre of Canadian political power, the Privy Council Office, the administrative arm of the Prime Minister’s Office.

Trilingual, confident and smart (she can remember exactly how many people she beat out to land most jobs she’s worked), she did not hide her former Xinhua job. After an initial meeting, a PCO director called to offer her a job as a senior communications analyst.

“I said, ‘I have to think about it,’” she says. However, he told her that two years of working for the PCO was equal to about 20 years elsewhere in the federal public service. “Essentially, the sky’s the limit when you work in this job,” she remembers thinking.

But Ms. Zhang’s rocket rise to the top of the public service began to fizzle out within a few months of her February 2003 arrival at the PCO, her former boss disclosed, speaking on condition and alleged to be a Chinese spy, she said she was fired three times from the public service. She is suing over $1 million and spends much of her time volunteering rather than working a nine-to-five job.

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“Everything I’ve seen of her since she came here is that of an exemplary Canadian,” says former MP and secretary of state David Kilgour of Ms. Zhang. “And look what the system has done to her.”

Earlier that day, she’d driven an hour from her Ottawa home to Prescott, Ont. to teach a public-speaking workshop for people who have been laid off or are coming out of retirement to build for themselves a new career.

“Everything I’ve seen in times of change and uncertainty, when you’re in the process of finding your way, you find your strengths, your vulnerabilities. But, ultimately, you’ll find your strength if you find a way to make a difference in other people’s lives.”

While on unpaid leave, Ms. Zhang tripled her volunteer work. With her ability to express herself, she says, she’s found meaning through volunteerism.

“Even though it was traumatic—you know, you don’t know what’s going on in your life—for me, I wanted to make sure I was going to continue to be able to offer something,” she says.

At any given time, Ms. Zhang sits on four or five boards of directors. She is currently the president of the Social Planning Council of Ottawa and chair of the board of the Ottawa-based Cultural Interpretation Services Foundation.

She is also treasurer of Canadians for Accountability, a whistleblower support group. Although out of suspicion of suspicious behavior, she feels her experience is similar to theirs. She has received support from former Liberal cabinet minister David Kilgour, a former PC MP and secretary of state in Jean Chrétien’s Liberal government, who issued her a Canadian passport despite its potential being barred and became concerned upon hearing her story.

“I don’t know what happened in China,” he says, “but everything I’ve seen of her since she came here is that of an exemplary Canadian. And look what the system has done to her.”

Ms. Zhang says there has been a lack of accountability in her case and those of other whistleblowers she’s met with. She relates to their experience of feeling demoralized or losing their jobs.

“I was saddened and disappointed by how some whistleblowers were treated,” she says. She plans to start law school next month at the University of Ottawa in the hopes of defending whistleblowers and better understanding the legal system to benefit her case.

When she first arrived in Canada, Ms. Zhang says democracy was something she had enjoyed, not something she felt she needed to help safeguard. Now, she says, she feels personally threatened and determined to make sure Canada sets a good example.

She says she poses no past, present or future threat to Canada’s security. She serves the Canadian government by serving it—despite everything she’s been through.

“I tell people that Canada and the Canadian government are not necessarily the same thing,” she says. “Canada is Canadians. And Canadians, average Canadians, have opened their arms and their doors. We’re behind you. We appreciate everything you do.”

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