

# FROM REALITY TO THE PAGE— AND BACK AGAIN

The best-selling author and ILA General Session speaker on the importance of writing to remember

By Marie Lu

Marie Lu - bestselling author of Legend and The Young Elites Trilogies

Flashback to the summer of 1989.

I was 4 years old, and my father had finally managed to secure a hard-won student visa to study at Louisiana State University. While my mother and I waited for our chance to join him, I lived with my aunt and cousin in Beijing, a few miles away from Tiananmen Square, the heart of China's government.

writes dystopian books. Is it based on childhood (loosely)?

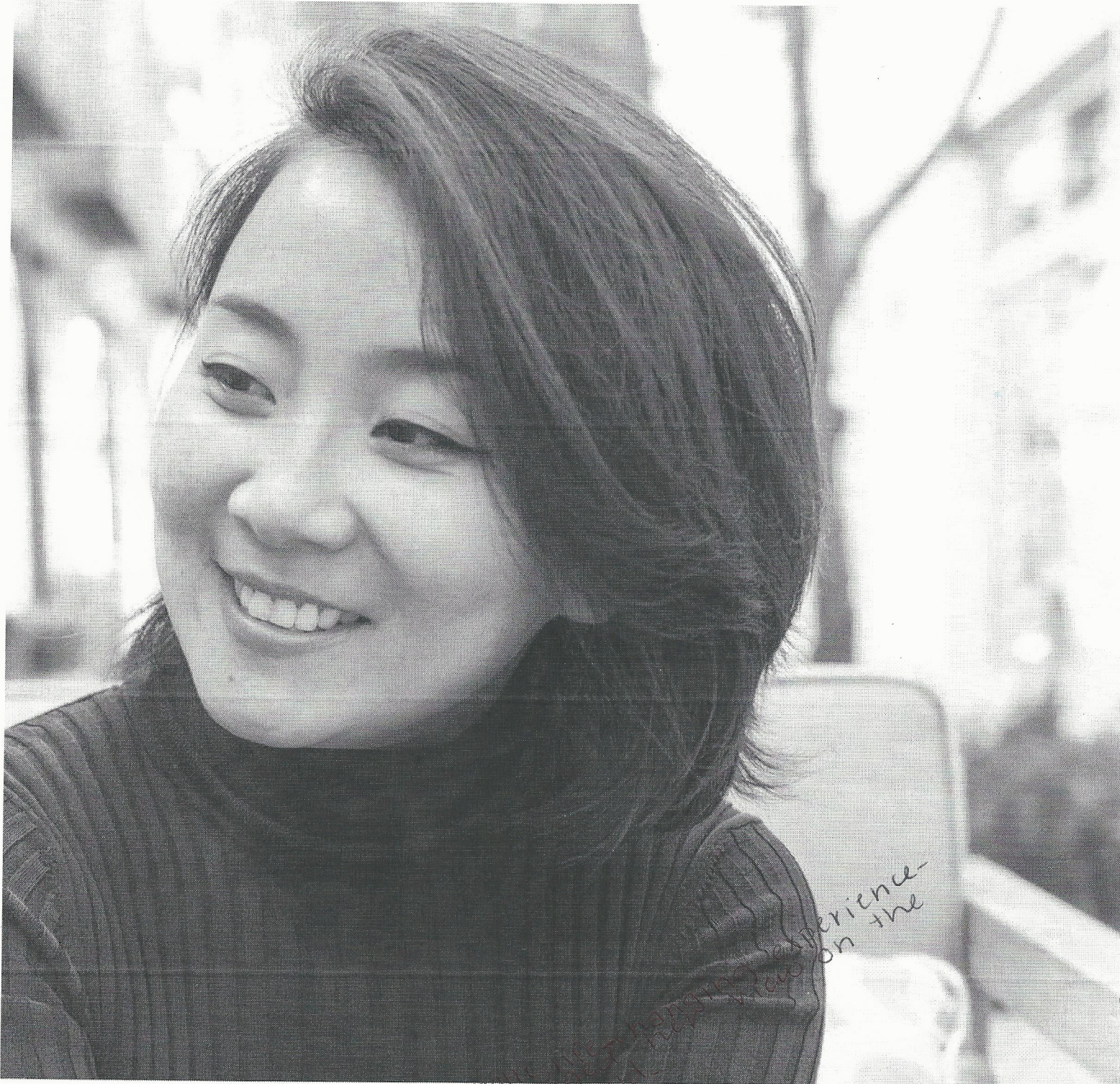
metaphor - comparison to earthquake - negative impact of government structure.

child's perspective

For many at the time, Tiananmen Square was the epicenter of a rising democratic movement breaking out all across the country. Throughout the spring of 1989, hundreds of thousands of young university students had gathered in the square to raise their voices against the government.

For me, the massive crowd in Tiananmen Square was a tourist attraction. We didn't have much in our little Beijing hutong—no hot water, no





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air conditioner or heater, no private bathroom, precious little to do. So, to entertain us, my aunt took my cousin and me out to the square every

weekend. I still remember looking on, one of my small hands in my aunt's, the other clutching a melting popsicle, as the crowds grew steadily larger, as

the students erected a white Statue of Liberty model in the square, as their leaders shouted into megaphones and the crowds answered with fervor.

The last day we watched the students was the day the government cracked down on them.

I remember going out to the square on the day of the massacre. My older cousin was throwing a fit that day, wailing after my aunt refused to let him wear his favorite red overalls—red

Didn't  
see it  
all?

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unreasonable regulations - similar to government restrictions in her books

being a revolutionary color that could draw unwanted, dangerous attention. So, as he stayed home in his tantrum, I accompanied my aunt to the square.

It was a warm, sticky day in early June, and the square was packed with people. There were already tanks in the streets, sitting quietly for their next orders. Soldiers stood in lines against the protesters, staring each other down.

The tanks waited and the soldiers waited. The students waited. And we waited, not knowing what would happen next.

I remember my aunt leaning down to me. Whatever she sensed in the air that I couldn't, it made her say, "Let's go home early. This isn't a good day to be here."

For years afterward, I would hear two different versions. One, the version from China and from family members, was that the protesters were rabble-rousers the state was forced to stop in order to preserve order. Two, the version from the rest of the world, was that these unarmed college students were gunned down for daring to speak their minds.

Being a child, of course, I didn't know what any of it meant. I didn't understand why my parents taught me not to speak of it, or why they'd always say this in a hushed tone, as if someone could hear us. I didn't grasp the era they had survived, the things they had seen. I didn't understand why I stayed home from kindergarten the next day because school had been canceled all across Beijing.

But I knew what a tank was. The image of them in the streets, waiting, has always stayed with me.

I did not have this memory in mind when I wrote *Legend* (Speak), not even during a specific scene where Republic executioners line up on the roofs of a square and fire down at gathered

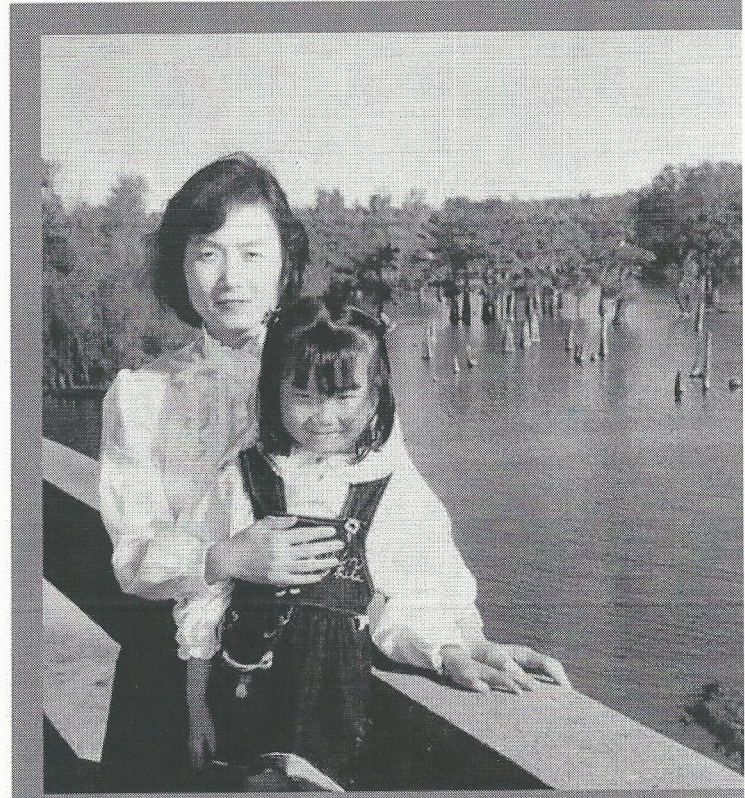
protesters. I'd written the scene as a logical progression of what the story's plot required.

It wasn't until I reread my book in published form that I recognized not just this, but many of my memories, echoed in fiction. My mother peeling an orange for me—we considered oranges an expensive treat when we first immigrated to Baton Rouge—when I was sick with the flu became a moment in *Legend* when June's older brother did the same for her. The street food of China, fried dough and meats on sticks, became the street food that populated Day's dystopian Los Angeles. The memory of white—the color of mourning—worn at Chinese funerals became the white dress June wore to her brother's memorial service. And the tanks in the streets of Tiananmen Square, facing off against unarmed students, became the moment the Republic cracked down on its people, the moment June saw her government for what it really was.

When *Legend* first released, I was frequently asked whether or not I thought the dystopian world of *Legend's* fractured United States could ever happen in real life. Would our country ever turn so extreme that we would build a wall to split ourselves in two? Could our America ever become the China of 1989 in the international eye?

I always answered that everything in *Legend's* world has already happened before or is happening right now. I did not know that I would be here today, looking on in horror as history becomes fiction becomes history. America has always been dystopian, though, hasn't it? Others have seen it at its bleakest, were living it long before this recent descent into madness. There is no such thing as utopia.

But here's the thing: China today barely resembles the China of 1989.



Marie Lu, age 5, with her mother shortly after arriving in the United States

It's not perfect, by any means—but Beijing's skyline is now full of skyscrapers, and people who had barely survived the horrors of the Cultural Revolution are now able to earn some semblance of luxury, to live comfortable lives. There is a new generation of young people energized to improve upon what their parents built.

That's the thing about progress. It pushes. It stumbles in the dark. It passes the baton, finds the light, and edges forward again. It always keeps moving.

It happened then. It will happen now.

And we write about it, consciously or not, so that we never forget. ■

Traumatic experiences stay w/ us forever

All "hush-bic it is" - contro-verse

Basic knowledge she got older

Based on her childhood - good and bad. Her fiction is strongly

not fiction-istic

The true meaning of writing

it makes a large difference

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Improvement of government w/ time.

ILA 2017

Marie Lu will speak at the Closing General Session on Monday, July 17. For more information, visit [ilaconference.org](http://ilaconference.org).

Everything can improve