

PRESS RELEASE

A guilty secret from Natalie Xiao Bell's childhood in China created a passion that has now launched a new UK business.

THE SCHOOLGIRL WHO HID AWAY HER FORBIDDEN SILK

To a young schoolgirl, growing up through China's Cultural Revolution, it was difficult to understand why a silk-filled duvet and a Shanghai silk jacket had to be kept so secret.

For, to Mao Tse-Tung's brand of communism, they represented bourgeois capitalism... and big trouble.

But Natalie Xiao Bell's love for a forbidden material has now turned her into a unique entrepreneur – a UK-based Chinese businesswoman importing high quality silk-filled duvets and bedding from the traditional silk-producing area of south east China.

"To me, silk will always be something to treasure," she says. "I've been involved with it since I was a little girl when I cultivated silk cocoons as a hobby. I was always fascinated by what colour of silk each worm would weave. As I got older my interest got stronger but, as a child, I always associated silk with wealth and power.

"Later, when my father worked away I used to snuggle up with my mother under the wonderful silk filled duvet he bought for her. It means the world to her. In our damp, thatched house it kept us warm through cold winters and cool in the extreme summer heat. But the duvet had to be hidden away and kept secret because silk was considered bourgeois.

"And if I went out in the beautiful multi-coloured floral silk jacket with hand-knotted buttons that my father bought for me, I had to wear a plain jacket over the top. If anyone found out, I would be in deep trouble because everybody wore very plain clothes then. Sometimes I felt so guilty about it that I criticised myself at school for my 'bourgeois' thoughts."

They were the only 'luxury' items the family possessed and became their secret as Mao's turbulent social revolution swept through early 70s China. As the country's vast population was "re-graded" in a bid to create the same social level, Natalie's 'middle class' parents were classified as social outcasts. "Nobody wanted to be friends with us," she says.

"In order to look poor, I was sent to school in plain, ragged clothes with patches on the trousers ... but I took all that off as soon as I got home."

Natalie's passion for her 'illicit' silk never left her. And it gained new significance later ... in Cheshire where she settled more than 10 years ago with her husband, David, who she met in Beijing.

Here, she began the search for a luxury product for her own import business. "As my understanding of British culture grew," she says, "I saw the value that people place on high quality things for their home rather than the mass produced items generally associated with China."

The memories of her mother's duvet returned. "I knew then what I wanted to do". Within weeks she had scoured the silk factories of Zhejiang Province and found a supplier for 'Snow Blossom' – the silk bedding business she now runs in Sale, Cheshire.

"Silk is so comfortable, light and warm next to my skin. It's a natural organic fibre and no-one is allergic to it. No wonder China is said to have provided silk for Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, over 2,000 years ago," she says.

"It's the perfect duvet filling because feathers can be a problem for asthmatics and with hollow fibre or synthetics it's difficult to get the right level of warmth and weight at the height of summer or the depth of winter. Under silk my family sleeps so restfully, all year round, and wakes so refreshed.

"Silk is a major icon of Chinese heritage. To bring it into British homes may be my business now but, to me, it will always mean warm memories of my childhood ... even through those difficult times."

'Snow Blossom' duvets - filled by hand with pure mulberry silk fibre - are sold, along with mattress toppers, silk covers, pillow cases, and sheets, on Natalie's website - www.snowblossom.co.uk - at shows and by word of mouth.

- 'Snow Blossom' is at PO Box 359 Sale, Cheshire M33 5XT. tel: 0161 905 2666

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