

Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution Short Guide

Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution by Ji-li Jiang

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Overview

Faithful to one girl's personal experience, this work narrates personal historical events in the context of one of the more turbulent and destructive periods of modern Chinese history, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It also works at recapturing the innocence of a young person, one of many thousands, who were persuaded that Chairman Mao wanted to help them personally by helping them to change the culture of China. The public image of the Cultural Revolution concentrated on transforming loyalty to family into loyalty to the good of the community and the nation. Jiang admits that she was devoted to Chairman Mao even after her own family was denounced and humiliated because her grandfather was once a landowner. Her story starts with a description of her happiness to be wearing a "red scarf, emblem of the Young Pioneers" as a successful child of modern Chinese society.

But she quickly brings to our attention in a very personal way the costs of such a broad social movement as the Cultural Revolution to each individual, their families, their futures, and the entire stability of a culture.

For example, she, like other children of so-called political enemies, was faced with a decision about whether to denounce her actor-father or to find herself vilified along with him. At the time, she was barely thirteen and classmates, teachers, and political officials alike detained and questioned her, trying to persuade her to criticize her father, change her family name, and reject her past. At an age when most of us are trying to discover our own identities and understand our abilities or plan for our futures, Jiang and hundreds of children like her were asked to make complicated political and social decisions that would change their lives forever. She obviously valued her family members' affection, talents, abilities and basic humanity, but there was little in the culture around her to support family loyalty. Nevertheless, Jiang explains how her decision to support her family as a child shaped her future interest in writing and her success in business and in life.

Like many of her peers who grew up in China in the 1960s and 1970s, she writes her personal narrative partly to reveal the truth about the Cultural Revolution, and partly to exorcise her own demons and guilt over the way she treated family members as she attempted to understand a world where all the rules had changed overnight. The stories are intensely vivid and personal, but also skillfully linked to large social movements as the Cultural Revolution is set in motion and then changes course in the early 1970s. The sense of the misused enthusiasm and passion of young people is mixed with an understanding that these experiences must be put behind if Jiang, and others like her, are to lead successful lives. She was able to leave China to pursue careers in the United States, but this was not the case for most Chinese, and that fact also weighs heavily on her.



About the Author

Ji-Li Jiang was born in Shanghai, China, in 1954. She grew up with one brother and one sister. All three children were born one year apart, so they remained close into adulthood. Her father was an actor in the Shanghai Children's Theatre, and he and her mother met through their acting careers. They were also revolutionaries who believed in the new communist China. Jiang and her family, including her father's mother, all lived together in one large room of a house that used to be occupied by their extended family. The house was on a quiet alley in Shanghai, and Jiang remembers being very happy there with her family, neighbors and friends, until the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Red Scarf Girl concerns the first two years of this massive political campaign as she *Red Scarf Girl with Connections*, 2001 *The Magical Monkey King*, 2002 personally experienced it. At the age of twelve, it did not occur to her that her family might be the target of political reeducation of the particularly brutal sort that characterized this extensive campaign.

Her grandfather, dead over thirty years by 1966, had been a landlord, one of the three black enemies of the masses. Her family was now suspected of all sorts of social crimes, and both adults and children were the target of pent-up hatred and frustrations of the less happy or less successful people around them. Her father was falsely accused, detained at his theatre, and forced to do physical labor under primitive conditions. Her family's house was ransacked twice, until there was nothing but straw and broken boxes left, and, most important, their reputation was forever damaged.

While the Jiang's survived the Cultural Revolution, neither parents nor children could hope for a professional future. They eventually left China to come to the United States, with Jiang coming first at the age of thirty. With no money, no friends, and hardly knowing any English, she eventually found work, received a degree from the University of Hawaii in 1987 at the age of thirty-four, and was able to help the rest of the family migrate. She worked hard to begin a career in hotel management. She also reports that she began to realize how little the people in the United States actually knew about China and its history. She wrote *Red Scarf Girl* to expose the lies and brutality of the Cultural Revolution, to explain what happened to her family, and to communicate to Americans about her own country. She also realized that she still loved her country and founded an organization to promote understanding between China and the West.

Jiang currently lives in San Francisco, California, where she writes children's books, talks to school children, and works with the East West Exchange, the company she established in the 1990s. Her story is told through the inexperienced eyes of a troubled and confused child as she remembers her life from the ages of twelve to fourteen, and its larger context is explained in an epilogue on some of the people named within. Additional historical and autobiographical information sets the personal story in the context of a sweeping national movement that forever changed the Chinese people's

attitudes towards their formerly beloved Chairman Mao, as well as their friends, neighbors and colleagues. It is a story that needs to be told.



Setting

The narrative does not stray far from Shanghai, China, just before, during, and after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Jiang was born there in 1954 and lived there until 1984, except for brief trips to the countryside for reeducation through labor, as it was called in China at that time. Shanghai was a busy, metropolitan center in 1964 and had been so for centuries. It remains one of the more volatile locales for revolutionary activity, and was also prominent in the 1989 youth movement that ended in the massacre at TianAn-Men in Beijing. During the period of this novel, it was an especially chaotic place to live. Most of Jiang's narrative is about her and her family, their friends and enemies in a small part of Shanghai. The novel opens when Jiang is twelve, happy with her life, a member of a loving family and a success at school. This is also 1966, the year when the Cultural Revolution started with the Socialist Education Movement. In this personal narrative, Jiang's schools where she studied, the theatre where her father worked, her and her friends' homes and their local streets form the backdrop for the personally devastating events that follow. Shanghai, as discussed in the book *Life and Death in Shanghai*, was the center of many political reeducation movements, educational reform activities, and, as the fervor of the revolutionary activity increased, brutal beatings, destructiveness, theft and denuncements that plagued anyone who could be identified with a historical landowner class of people. Not only did Jiang live during this terrifying period of chaos when regular schools were closed down in favor of socialist reeducation and children and parents were turned against each other, she also lived in one of the major Chinese cities where corrupt members of rival political parties tried to encourage the populace to make examples of the educated, the currently or formerly wealthy, creative and intellectual people. Anyone who studies the period notes that very few important political figures in China suffered the public humiliation that Jiang describes as the daily plight for local organizers, teachers, writers, and actors in her family's sphere.

Her beloved school was turned into a horror for the teachers, as students were encouraged to criticize and beat them. Her home was repeatedly invaded, rifled and robbed, as were many others in Shanghai and cities like Beijing (Peking), and Guangzhou (Canton). While Jiang writes a personal account, she is also aware that her family's experiences were representative and that they were extremely distressing for young people who grew up respecting the great Chairman Mao, who initiated the Communist Revolution that founded the People's Republic of China in 1949, as well as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966. As Jiang notes in her essay, "Troubling Times in China": During the revolution many innocent people suffered. China's educational system was destroyed, and the economy was badly damaged. The Chinese people began to distrust their government and each other.

Nearly one million people died, and many more were injured during this ten-year period. Years later, Chinese government officials admitted that the Cultural Revolution had been a national disaster.



Jiang is writing about both a time and a place in her novel. Her personal view of family life in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution is contrasted with her life in the same place before that fateful year and eighteen years later as she and her family moved to the United States and started new lives.



Social Sensitivity

Embedded in Jiang's story are many references to the personal, social, and economic damage which had a long-ranging effect on China's people after the Cultural Revolution. She focuses on the social injustice done to families, but also to people in positions of public respect such as local officials, teachers, principals and other community leaders. This type of social injustice is communicated through the people closest to her as a child. Her father, many of his colleagues at the theatre, teachers that were previously respected and conscientious, were the focus of attacks by individuals such as Six Fingers, a man who did not seem interested in working at his factory but had the energy to physically attack neighbors, especially those weaker than him.

Men like Six Fingers take advantage of the social chaos that characterized this period to make themselves seem more important without working for it. Young people who are little more than bullies at school, like Yin Lan-lan and Du Hai, are also freed to get revenge on figures of authority that had previously disciplined them. They thrive on the many criticism campaigns that target individual teachers and question teachers' and administrators' authority to promote order. These former social outcasts, some of whom are encouraged to hound students whose families have been identified as political targets, are still not acceptable to Jiang. She can't bring herself to emulate them and so is once again forced to consider the conflict between social and personal values.

While Jiang acknowledges that she and some of her friends hardly understood what was happening to themselves and their families in 1966-68, it is her adult understanding that allows her and her readers to analyze the corrupt intentions at the national level that lead to the intense social disintegration of the Cultural Revolution. Her warnings throughout this narrative are explained in terms of their irresponsibility in using the whole population of China to pursue their internal power struggles, a perspective that did not become apparent to most people in China or, indeed, in the world, until the 1970s, when the political tide turned with the death of Chou En-Lai in 1975 and Mao Zedong in 1976. Besides the personal message of individual tragedies, lost and blighted lives, Jiang's story cautions all of us against unquestioned belief in any one authority figure and reminds us of our responsibility to make our own decisions about our families, communities, and our nation. This is a powerful message to emerge from two years in the life of an otherwise fairly normal city girl in the modern era of the 1960s and 1970s.



Literary Qualities

Jiang is telling her own story in this personal narrative, and she carefully nurtures the impression that she is narrating each experience as it happened to her. However, there are a few basic narrative tricks she uses to create this impression and to make her story seem simple. The most apparent, after the fact that she narrates in the first person, is to tell the story chronologically. At the end of her narrative, she explains that this story as a whole covers her life from the ages of twelve to fourteen, as she waits to move from primary school to junior high school. She carefully identifies the period of time she is describing in each section so that it seems like we are following a strict progression through time, but she starts out by using seasons: the first year starts in the spring with her discussion of early 1966 and her plans to get into the best Junior High School in Shanghai. Her first impressions of trouble are near the end of this year of school, when her parents tell her she must not try out for the revolutionary dance group at her school because her family has a political problem. She then describes the late spring, as all the children discover that they will be assigned schools by district, not according to tests. Then she describes the fall, as schools are suspended and the junior high teachers are all experiencing types of reeducation and she spends time at home with her grandmother and mother while her brother and sister go back to primary school. Through the fall and winter, the narrative moves from seasons to months, November, December, as events that destroy her happy family pile one upon the other. Her father is detained for reeducation and is taken away from the family. It is easy to miss the fact that the narrative jumps from winter of 1966-67 to fall of 1967 with few details. The narrative is picked up again when she goes back to school, a year later than she expected. By the middle of that year, she has been repeatedly exposed to examples of her change in social status, and we progress through the months as the family is repeatedly attacked, finally losing almost everything they own, including their good name. Her father still gone, her mother humiliated and ill, her grandmother forced to sweep the street with other landlord's wives, she is cheered only by glimpses of her father and a resolution that she will be loyal to her family even if she does not always agree with her parents and grandparents or understand their problems.

The careful identification of chronology helps us feel that the narrative is historical as we are used to dates and times in our history. She refers only briefly to events outside the family during her story, telling us about them at the end of her story. This technique demonstrates that these two years were very significant for her and her family even though the family took many years to recover from the harsh treatment. In fact, her father was not cleared of all charges against him until 1980, thirteen years later.

The chronological approach is also a way of helping the reader accept the basic structure of the story, which is much more episodic than it at first appears. Each period of time in the acceleration of the personal chaos experienced by families and individuals caused by the Cultural Revolution is characterized by an episode that illustrates ideas, which the Chinese government wants to promote as revolutionary. For example, a campaign to get rid of old ways of thinking, called The Four Olds, is demonstrated by young people destroying business signs whose language seems old-fashioned, all



without any consideration for the cost and pain it would create for their owners. Campaigns against foreign ideas are demonstrated with a small group of Red Guards, high school children given the duty of being cultural revolutionaries, stopping a man in the street because he is dressed in a slightly Western fashion and destroying his clothes and shoes. Policies on how to get rid of class privilege, the idea that people may be successful because their parents or grandparents were landlords or wealthy people, become very personal when we see what they mean to Jiang's family and that of her family's friends and associates.

While the story seems to be based on the passage of time, it is really a selection of episodes that show how Jiang came to understand each of the political campaigns as it affected individuals. Her view is that they were usually treated unfairly, because they had the misfortune to be successful and somewhat in the public eye before the Cultural Revolution, as was her family of actors, teachers, good students and people who were respected in the community. She is also careful to identify the leaders of political groups, Red Guards, and Red Successors as adults and children who were not very successful under the standard social structure. Thus she focuses on the Cultural Revolution through these episodes, as they are somewhat similar to witch-hunts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe and then in America.

This personalized and episodic structure, somewhat masked by an apparent chronology, is told in the voice of a child who alternately mourns her family's difficulties but also wants to reject them, to change her name, to believe in her earlier illusions that Chairman Mao is her father and mother. These conflicts between family loyalty and respect for the public leaders she grew up with are sharply portrayed as a way of both getting us to accept that this is a child's story and helping us to understand how so many people were persuaded to go along with the social chaos, brutality, and unfairness of the way the various campaigns were implemented at the local and personal level, creating the many individual tragedies of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In her Epilogue, she returns to the perspective of an adult who left China at thirty, in 1984, because she and her family realized they would never overcome the negative effects of the Cultural Revolution on their reputations. Thus she creates the idea of a history, the sympathy for intense personal tragedy, and later gives it a political and social context as she briefly describes the lives of classmates sent to the country for ten years, a father who is not able to recover his career, friends and enemies whose lives are destroyed or put on hold for a decade or more, and who it was that so many participated in the illusion that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was good for the country. It was only good for the leaders that were playing political games with the lives of thousands of individuals just like Jiang and her family.

We still might ask why it is that Jiang only described two years, and ends her story at the lowest point in her family's fortunes, when much of their hope for survival lays on her shoulders. But it is also a way for her to arouse our sympathies for a poor, sad girl who has lost all hope except the hope that she can help save her family.

This makes the whole story much more immediate as we understand that she and her friends and family were making decisions based on the belief that there probably will not be a happy ending for them.

As indeed there was not for the many who were beaten to death, driven to suicide, died in forced labor in the countryside or in factories, or were simply never able to recover their social respect, complete their education, or find ways to recover a future. Other writers of this kind of personal narrative use the stories of multiple people to make their point about the pervasive destruction of the Chinese economy, school system, social system, intellectual, artistic, and scientific communities and the people's faith in their government. Jiang has managed to create these ideas through the seemingly simple story of one girl's experiences.



Themes and Characters

While concentrating on ideas like personal heroism, family loyalty, social responsibility, rapid cultural change and children's desire for role models, Jiang discusses the conflicts that arise for a child who is asked to choose between family and society. From the perspective of an adult in her late thirties, Jiang begins her personal story as a happy twelve year old getting ready to take tests which will determine if she can attend one of the best junior high schools. This is the beginning of career plans under the traditional English-based school system in China. A good junior high means a good high school, and then a good college, so Jiang is very concerned to do well on her tests. She is a talented girl whose teachers like her and for whom family life is happy and stable. But when she is twelve, the year is 1966 and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, begun by Chairman Mao ZeDong in late 1965, is sweeping the country.

Unlike her parents and grandparents, Jiang has not known any other political and economic system than the Communism organized by Chairman Mao and his associates.

She explains that she felt only respect and affection for him and his policies, and that she and her friends longed to be like the revolutionary heroes they studied in school.

They were taught that brave soldiers, who helped to oppose the Japanese during World War II and to found the Chinese Communist nation in 1949, were the best role models. The Cultural Revolution was presented to them as a chance to be a different kind of hero, a cultural hero in their own cities and in their own homes. The movement appealed to the fervor of young people, and its effects were felt first in the major cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, so Jiang and her family were often among the first to witness the effects of new social policies.

Jiang was not concerned about her own role until she talked with her parents about becoming a revolutionary dancer, at age twelve. She was asked to audition, but her parents told her to refuse because her father had a political problem. She describes how this news devastated her. It meant that she would probably not be chosen for dancing or acting, or get into a good school, and might undergo public criticism. If her family is under suspicion, she would be subject to taunts and other abuse by her classmates and even her teachers. She and her family would also be taunted, robbed, and even physically abused by their neighbors and in their own homes. The political problem was that her father's father, who was long dead, had been a landlord many years in the past and so her father, and perhaps her whole family, needed to be reeducated.

This idea came from a socialist way of looking at people in terms of their social class, with the majority of people being workers, farmers, and soldiers. The new idea was that the lower social classes should teach the upper ones, those of artists, teachers, intellectuals, former landowners and other people who were visible in public life.



Jiang tells her own story, trying to stick carefully to the perspectives of a young teenager who is constantly trying to decide whether her family or their attackers should be believed, a terrible burden for someone at that impressionable age. She works out her loyalties in the context of encounters with normal people with whom she has daily contact. These people, including the initially beloved Chairman Mao, live for us through her descriptions alone. The majority of the work describes only two years, from the time she is twelve until she is fourteen. Her father's, mother's, and grandmother's ordeals lasted much longer and are addressed only in the afterward. For years, her grandmother was forced to sweep the street twice a day, beginning at the age of seventy-four. Her father was accused of one crime after the other until he was finally cleared in 1980. But at the age of fourteen, when confronted with a choice between the ideals of the party and loyalty to her family, and despite all she might lose personally through defending and protecting her family, her family won out.

Almost all characters of note in this narrative are relatives and friends of Jiang and her family or they are classmates and neighbors who become the enemies of the Jiang's in the Cultural Revolution's ensuing class struggle. The one exception, portrayed as an intimate and vivid part of Jiang's life, is Chairman Mao Ze-Dong. It is important to understand that most school children in China during this time, like Jiang Ji-Li, had a very personal relationship with Chairman Mao as an ideal human, an unattainable role model for all children and their beloved leader. One might compare this to the way some children are taught to think about the Pope of the Catholic Church, some of our presidents, like Washington and Lincoln, or the Dalai Lama of the Buddhist faith, with uncritical devotion. Jiang and most of her classmates loved Chairman Mao, revered him, and would never have considered that he was capable of making mistakes. They were taught that he was their great father and had their personal welfare, as well as that of the country, in mind in all the decisions he made. Their teachers told them that he was always aware of how well they studied and behaved. So he was not only a distant powerful person but also a personal advisor and friend, albeit one who was interpreted through teachers, local political leaders, police officers, and even some of their parents.

Jiang is the eldest of three children. When the story begins, her brother Ji-Yong is eleven years old and her sister Ji-Yun is ten. She describes some of their actions and also her affect for them. She feels protective of them, and together they try to survive the family attacks, but they are not very prominent in the story. We know that Ji-Yong becomes resentful and begins to fight back physically, exposing himself and other family members to the danger of more severe reprisals, and that Ji-Yun becomes more and more fearful as she is attacked by bullies, humiliated in her classes and denied any hope of a meaningful future, but this is still basically Jiang's story.

Jiang explains early on that she felt privileged to be part of such a talented family.

Her pride in her family rests partly in her father who was a prominent actor in the Shanghai Theatre. He was born into a wealthy family whose wealth had been squandered by his father's generation. Nevertheless, he had worked hard at school and graduated from St. John's University in Beijing in 1949, staying in China after the Communist government came to power because he believed in their goals. In his



forties, he was six feet tall and played villains in children's plays. He also commanded much respect and admiration, so that Jiang saw him as another kind of role model, someone she could respect and wanted to emulate. His friends and colleagues visited the Jiang home to talk, perform pieces from their plays, sing and play music, in what they all called Jiang's salon. He, like their mother, has worked for the Chinese Communist Party and believed that it has helped China. Jiang and her sister and brother got some of their faith in the Chinese Communist government from their parents, who did not at first criticize Chairman Mao's new policies. Nevertheless, Mr. and Mrs. Jiang were intelligent enough to know that their family background might be a danger to their children. Hence, they took several steps to protect the children from public criticism and humiliation, steps that they could not fully explain. The astuteness of Jiang's parents is not really evident to the reader, as it was not to Jiang, until later in the story. She obeys them when they tell her to refuse an audition for a politically motivated dance troupe, but she does not understand why until her father is criticized, detained at his theatre, and then she is asked to denounce him in order to be accepted as a good citizen of China. They decide when to burn family photographs, get rid of furniture and expensive clothing, and paint grandmother's fancy trunks so that they will not be seen as too wealthy when their home is invaded by Red Guards.

It is clear this is a painful process, but one that all the adults agree is necessary. Only later does Jiang understand that these material objects can be used to demonstrate her family's social class, and that even very personal parts of her family life can be examined for their social meaning. This is a difficult concept for adults, and created many conflicts in loyalties for children.

Jiang also respected her mother for her politics as well as her home life. She is also a bright, educated, successful woman. She works in a sports-equipment store, and while her husband is detained for months at the theatre, she provides the only family income. Mrs. Jiang is also a devoted revolutionary who tells the children that she gave birth to the three of them in three years so that she could do her duty as a mother but not interrupt her career as a revolutionary for the new China. She joins her husband in trying to protect the rest of the family and predict the best actions in order to avoid the most destructive censure of the young Red Guard. Her anxieties about her husband, separated from the family for so long, her sacrifices to keep them all alive, and the criticism she is subjected to at work finally result in grave illness: "Her face was colorless and hollow. Her temples were gray.

Yesterday she had fainted again." But she still has the strength to advise Jiang on how to protect her brother and sister, demonstrating her devotion to her family as well as her belief in her husband's innocence.

Jiang describes how her mother sacrifices and struggles to the point where she loses weight and becomes ill, then how she is in effect refused treatment as the wife of a "black" landowner's son. But then she promises to protect her siblings and realizes, through watching her mother's courageous efforts, that, "I would hide my tears and my fear for Mom and Grandma's sake. It was my turn to take care of them."



Jiang's grandmother is also remarkable in her own right. Grandma is a Muslim, a member of one of the minority religions still practiced in China. She traveled, as a young girl, over 1000 miles from Tianjin to marry a man she had never met, the "black" landlord whose history is causing the family so many problems. But her grandmother married, and she was one of the few Chinese women to graduate from a Western Style High School in 1914. While Jiang is proud of her unusual grandmother, she also criticizes her for having old ideas. She becomes one of the sources of serious conflict for Jiang, who loves and respects her as a person but also sees her as an inappropriate role model for a modern Chinese girl.

When her grandmother objects to the wholesale destruction of store signs that use oldstyle language, Jiang replies, "But Grandma, we have to get rid of those old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits, Chairman Mao said they are holding us back."

As Jiang grows, she grows in sympathy for the plight of her grandmother and many other older people drawn into the whirlwind of public denunciation and humiliation. Grandma is devoted to her grandchildren and hides with the children in the park so that all of them can escape the worst of the physical attacks on the family. Jiang's parents encourage them all to stick by her even when they know that it will mean trouble in their own lives, but they do not always do so willingly. Within a very few years, as her aged and weak grandmother is forced to endlessly sweep the street outside their house in order to learn about the lives of peasants, she is still embarrassed. "I wished she could sweep faster. Although every single neighbor and classmate knew what had happened to my family, I could not bear to have them see Grandma sweeping." Yet Jiang could not help but worry that her beloved grandmother would be sent to the countryside, that her dad would be beaten to death, that her little sister and brother would be irrevocably damaged by the many family privations. Through it all, Grandma is painted in Jiang's inexperienced eyes, but the reader can see in this elderly woman an ability to survive that is admirable. And Jiang finally admits, "I no longer worried that she was a landlord's wife. She was my grandmother." Grandma died in China in 1992, at the age of ninety-eight.

Song Po-Po is a person in the background of Jiang's life. She has been in the household as long as Jiang can remember, a faithful family retainer who comes to help them out every day even though they no longer have money to pay her. She is introduced early in the story. While Jiang describes her personal relationship with this older woman, she is also an example of the change in thinking that the young narrator associates with the new China, even though she cannot always understand why. Song Po-Po wants to be with the family, but she is an example of the old way of thinking. Within a very few months after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang begins to question whether the family should have a servant to help them. Halfway through the narrative, her parents realize that they have to send Song away as a political liability.

Song herself does not seem to understand or agree with the problem, but Jiang struggles with it, as she must herself now shoulder some of the work that Song Po-Po had done. It is clear to her and to the reader that a form of reeducation, however brutally enacted in relation to the individuals in this family, is taking place. It is not clear whether



this process is more for show than it is for the benefit of those involved. She dies soon after Jiang goes to the United States in 1984.

For Jiang, friendship is an extension of family loyalty. Her close friend An Yi remains Jiang's loyal friend for most of the narrative, helping her out at school and trying to protect her outside of school. Soon after Jiang must give up her dream of dancing in the People's Liberation dance group, she comments: "An Yi said that I seem to have changed into a different person." This dear friend did not reject Jiang even when she was hiding out in the library and at home. While An Yi also suffers during the Cultural Revolution, her family is not so sharp a target, yet she will not turn on her friend as so many other classmates have.

Her loyalty to family and friends is an example that Jiang can respect. An Yi's own grandmother commits suicide in despair at how other old people are being treated, and the family is not even allowed to mourn her properly. Jiang is happy to report in her Epilogue that her friend avoids being sent to the countryside for reeducation (which as often as not meant death for city-bred children) by her diagnosis of asthma.

Many of Jiang's other role models also suffer during the Cultural Revolution, and this helps her to decide that loyalty to her family will take precedence. Her teachers, members of the People's Liberation Army, Red Guard, and Red Successors are described during their attacks on Jiang, her friends, and family. One particularly sad case is Chang Hong, a young woman who seems to be a friend and whose behavior Jiang has difficulty interpreting. Chang Hong becomes an example of what could have happened to Jiang if she had accepted the ideology of the Cultural Revolution more completely. The story includes glimpses of Chang Hong's life as she moves from relative obscurity to a prominent political position as a member of the schools in the Red Guard Committee. Chang Hong takes her political duties seriously and tries, on several occasions, to persuade Jiang that she should denounce her father's name.

Like the adults around her, she carefully explains to Jiang that she will have to give up her family to become an educable child, one who embraces the new China and its new ideas. Like many of the more fervent local officials during the Cultural Revolution, she is not able to hold onto her power for very long. By the time Jiang's family is beginning to recover from their public attacks, Chang Hong has been sent to Mongolia to labor in the countryside. In the Epilogue, Jiang reports that she spent ten years there, married, and returned to Shanghai but only after losing her chance at a good education and losing her beloved epileptic brother.



Topics for Discussion

1. The Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are two modern Chinese-speaking countries. When was each founded? Where do their governments currently reside? Why?

2. Is the China described in Jiang's book the same now as it was in the 1960s and 1970s? How would you find this out?

3. What was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution? When did it start?

What sorts of things did people in China do during that decade from 1966-1976?

What was happening in the rest of the world? The United States? France and Germany, Russia, etc.

4. What did the Cultural Revolution do to the educational system in China? How did this affect Jiang when she was a Red Scarf Girl? What about after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976?

5. What was the Red Guard? When was it first formed and what sorts of duties and responsibilities did its members have? Do you think it was a good idea to have a Red Guard? What were some of the advantages and disadvantages?

6. Who was Chairman Mao? When did he live and what did he mean to the Chinese people? Chairman Mao was a charismatic leader during the war with Japan and the war between the Nationalist and communist forces in China from the 1930s through 1949. Was he also a good leader after the war? How do you tell what a good leader should do for his or her country?

7. It was well known that the Red Guard was encouraged to read only one book during the Cultural Revolution. This was the infamous Little Red Book, also known as the Quotations of Chairman Mao. What was in the Little Red Book? Young people were also asked to write logans and critiques in Da-zi-bao or Big Character texts and decorate public places with these repeated statements. Can you explain the function of this sort of exercise in uniform thinking and behavior?

8. In 1976, the two major Chinese leaders from the war years both died. Chou En-Lai died in the spring and Mao Tse-tung in the fall. Do you think this had anything to do with the official ending of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution?

9. What do we learn about the personal cost of the Cultural Revolution from following the troubles of Jiang and her family? She was twelve at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and her family suffered personally under some of the excesses of the Red Guard. How did she distinguish herself from the rest of her family? What sorts of psychological and material suffering did they endure? Do you think their experience was at all typical?



10. Jiang describes the many times that individual's personal grudges were used to start attacks on individuals who were too smart, too successful, or just in the public eye. Do you think this is a common occurrence during periods of social unrest? How would you compare these personal attacks to the witch trials in Salem or perhaps some of the American attacks on black leaders or on anti-war activists during the Vietnam War?

11. Jiang seems to have survived her difficulties and has gone on to develop a career in business and as a writer. How did she overcome all of her difficulties? Did she need the help of friends? Do you think most people in China were able to do as well?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find a copy of the Quotations from Chairman Mao and look at the contents. Are all the pieces useful sayings that can be chanted in groups? One popular saying was, "Women hold up half the sky." What other kinds of texts are in the book?
2. Chairman Mao was married to a woman called Jiang-Ching. In the first part of the 1970s she was very popular, then, after Mao's death in 1976, she was put in jail for her crimes against the Chinese people. Look for biographical information on her and make your own evaluation of whether she worked for her own ends or for his.
3. Research the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and what it was supposed to accomplish. Think about whether it served any useful purpose in China in the 1960s and early 1970s. Where do you think it went wrong?
4. Pick a level of education in China and look at how it was changed by the Cultural Revolution. Which schools were still in session, if any? How long were others closed down?
5. During the Cultural Revolution, there were many more attacks on teachers, intellectuals, and local leaders than on anyone in the national leadership. Who were some of the figures attacked?
6. Look at what it meant to be a Red Guard in the 1960s. You can read about their activities in magazines of the time, which will corroborate Jiang's experiences. Think about how we learn to evaluate the information we get from our leaders, teachers, news media and friends. How would you sort out the truth from the untruth?
7. The family suffered a severe blow during the Cultural Revolution. This attack on the family was directly related to the feudal landlord system that dominated Chinese culture even under the Republic of China. What were Chinese landlords like? What kind of power did rich Chinese families have? Why was Mao trying to replace loyalty to the family with loyalty to the country?
8. We do not have such a strong sense of the primacy of family relationships in America because we also learn social responsibility. How is this sort of idea transmitted? Look at some of our institutions such as social security, child protection agencies, religious or grass roots organizations. In contrast to what you see of Chinese culture, how do these work to create a sense of social responsibility?
9. Jiang's book is only one of many which came out after the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and described how bad it was for individuals and the society. Can you find any other books like this one and compare the stories? Do you think there are many such books that praise the Cultural Revolution? Why or why not?



10. Look into the short history of the personal narrative as a literary form and compare it to biography and autobiography. Consider how a writer gives meaning to a story. Is there any difference between these non-fiction forms?

For Further Reference

Comerford, Lynda Brill. "The Story of a Red Scarf Girl." Publishers Weekly (November 10, 1997): 28-37. This long review is a very detailed description of the book and also gives the reader more information on the personal background of the author.

Devereaux, Elizabeth, and Diane Roback.

Review of Red Scarf Girl. Publishers Weekly (July 28, 1997): 75-77. This extensive review clarifies some of the political characters in the book.

Jiang, Ji-Li. "Troubling Times in China."

National Geographic World (June 2000): 24-29. Jiang writes about her personal experiences during and after the Cultural Revolution, how she came to America, and how she decided to write her autobiographical work.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Jiang has written a longer version of *Red Scarf Girl*, entitled *Red Scarf Girl with Connections*. Readers should look at the nine extra pages of historical and biographical material that this book adds to her original text. For books about other young Chinese people who lived through the Cultural Revolution, try Chi-huan Wen's *The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution* (1995).

The author of this book writes a long introduction about the Cultural Revolution and follows it with thirteen stories from friends and acquaintances who were children at that time. He interviews them as adults to get their impressions and memories. Zhu Xiao Di has written a book about his own memories of this turbulent period in *Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China* (1998). The vocabulary and ideas in this book are more advanced than what you find in Jiang's.

Wen was born in 1958, and when he was ten his parents were taken away to two different forced-labor camps. He tells his own story of personal suffering, courage and hope over a longer space of time. Another factual account about a woman who was already elderly in 1966 is by Leila Merrel Foster in *Nien Cheng: Courage in China* (1992).

This story gives us a simple biography of the woman who wrote a very famous study of the Cultural Revolution in the city of Shanghai. This biography will appeal to third and fourth grade readers. Those who want more information can look at Nien Cheng's own book, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1986), which describes her many years of imprisonment and suffering during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and explains it in the context of her and her husband's previous work with Western companies and familiarity with Western culture. Western ways were very much condemned in China during this time. For a Western view of China right after the end of the Cultural Revolution, there is Emily Cheney Neville's *The China Year* (1991), which is told from the perspective of an American teenager, Henrietta Rich, from New York City. It gives readers a very different picture of living in one of China's biggest cities, Beijing. Emily spends a year there with her father and mother as her father teaches at a Beijing university, and she learns much about herself and her own family by contrast.



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