

# **Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution Study Guide**

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

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# Plot Summary

Red Scarf Girl, by Ji-li Jiang is the fascinating story of Ji-li and her family's experiences during the Cultural Revolution in China. The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 when Ji-li is twelve. Up until that time she is very happy with life in China. She is a good student who is admired by her classmates. Then one day she is selected to audition for the dance team at the Central Liberation Army Arts Academy. She is elated and honored at the opportunity and excitedly tells her family that evening at dinner. Her parents tell her that she cannot audition. There would be a political background investigations check that her family could not pass.

Ji-li's world is shattered. She never knew that there were political problems in her family. She always thought that she had a bright future and could be anything that she wanted to be. Now she knows that it is not true. Her parents tell her and her brother and sister that what happened occurred many years ago and does not concern them.

Ji-li and her friends and brother and sister come home with stories about events taking place as a result of the Cultural Revolution. Their grandmother and parents are careful in the words they use in cautioning them about taking part in the events. Ji-li has problems doing some of the things that are required of the students, such as criticizing teachers. When she is nominated by her class for election to the Red Successors, one of the students accuses her long deceased grandfather of being a landlord and her father of being a Rightist.

Ji-li's world continues to crumble and over the next two years she learns more of the story as she and her family have more problems due to the Cultural Revolution. She gradually learns more about her father's land owning family and how she and her family have a class status problem because of this.

Ji-li's father has problems with the work unit at the theater he works at. He and his wife spend a lot of time talking in the bathroom. When he is accused of listening to foreign radio broadcasts, he is detained and away from home for several months. He is subject to class struggle meetings with the work unit trying to force him to confess. Eventually, Ji-li is subject to study session at school where they try to pressure her into testifying against her father. Just as things look their worst, the personnel at the theater change and Ji-li's father and others are released. Even though the family is together again, their lives have been devastated. Ji-li's father is cleared of all charges in 1980 and the family soon moves to the United States.

Red Scarf Girl is the story of what Ji-li and her family lived through. It tells of the fears, the problems, and the wrong doings of the time. The book is quick and easy to read and well worth the reader's time.



# Prologue, The Liberation Army Dancer, pgs. 1-18

## Prologue, The Liberation Army Dancer, pgs. 1-18 Summary and Analysis

Ji-li is born on the Chinese New Year. Her name means lucky and beautiful and her parents gave her the name because they wanted her to be the happiest girl in the world. She is twelve years old when the Cultural Revolution begins in 1966.

In *The Liberation Army Dancer*, Ji-li describes the classroom with the picture of Chairman Mao on the wall. She and her classmates are having a problem with the timing in a song. Principal Long walks in with a female People's Liberation Army soldier. She selects Ji-li and Tong Chao to go to the gym with her. She tests their flexibility then sends them back to their classroom.

After class, the principal explains that the soldier, Comrade Li, selected Ji-li and three others to audition for the Central Liberation Army Arts Academy dance training class. Ji-li runs home to tell her family. Her family is not as thrilled as she is and suggests that she not do the audition. Her father says there will be a political background investigation of the family. He tells her that their family will not pass the investigation.

The next day, Ji-li brings Principal Long a note from her father. Later she has to tell her teachers that she is not going to the audition. Ji-li hides behind a tree and cries.

Until this time, Ji-li thought her parents were perfect. Both had been theater actors. Her grandmother had been a school teacher who retired when Ji-li's mother had children. Her brother Ji-yung is one year younger than Ji-li and her sister Ji-yun is two years younger. Living with them is their housekeeper Song Po-po. They live in a big building in Shanghai and their Fourth Aunt and some cousins live in the same building.

Ji-li's family lives in one large room with a large private bath. Many times on Saturday evenings, they have salons which are attended by many of their parents' actor friends.

Ji-li had been very happy until the offer to audition. She always thought she could have her choice of occupations. Now she is withdrawn and hides a lot. It doesn't help that the other three students failed their auditions. She does not know what kind of political problems her family has.



# Destroy the Four Olds, pgs. 19-37

## Destroy the Four Olds, pgs. 19-37 Summary and Analysis

Ji-li and her brother and sister rent picture books at Grandpa Hong's stall and then sit on the wood benches and read them. Her friend An-Yi comes and tells them that a crowd is breaking the sign at the Great Prosperity Market. This is part of the Destroy the Four Olds campaign so they go to watch, and is part of the Cultural Revolution which began in May. They rush to Nanjing Street to watch.

The crowd watches as the men try to break the sign. Ji-yung helps stomp on the sign. The men finally break the sign with an axe. As the children walk home, they point out other store signs that are in conflict with the new China.

That night at dinner, they are surprised at their grandmother's reaction to their news of breaking the sign. The children explain what they have been taught about the Four Olds. Their parents motion Grandma to be quiet, as the children explain what they are taught in school. The Four Olds campaign would help China achieve her goals and destroy the old ideas and customs of the people. The children are proud to be a part of it.

There is a great deal of talk between Ji-li and her classmates about what is and is not a fourold. They point out the fourolds in each other's lives.



# Writing Da-zi-bao, pgs. 38-51

## Writing Da-zi-bao, pgs. 38-51 Summary and Analysis

According to the newspapers, the schools are producing revisionists, not good socialists. School classes are suspended and students are told to make posters. Ji-li and several other students can think of nothing to criticize about their teachers. Ji-li, An-Yi, and Zhang-Jie no they have to write something so they go outside to see what others have written.

The girls are amazed at what some of the students have written. They criticize the educational system and the teachers. Ji-li cannot picture her teachers in the way they are portrayed. Since she can't write anything bad about them, she copies something from the newspaper.

The students then are told to attach the posters to the houses of the bourgeoisie. Ji-li is assigned to the house of her relative, Jiang-Xi, who wears make up and dresses in American clothes. She stays at the back of the group not wanting to be seen. She doesn't want to be accused of allowing her family relationships to interfere with her political principles. Jiang-Xi is forced to paste the poster on her door and forced to read it aloud. On the way back to school, she notices that Grandpa Hong's stall has been posted.

One day An-Yi comes to tell Ji-li that her name is in a poster. They run to the school yard to read the poster accusing her of being the favorite student of one of the teachers. An-Yi says that posters were written about her mother. The two girls cry.



# **The Red Successors, Graduation, pgs. 52-79**

## **The Red Successors, Graduation, pgs. 52-79 Summary and Analysis**

Soon after the poster incident, Ji-li is sick with a fever and stays home for ten days. This is the first time that she is happy to miss school. Both Grandma and Song Po-po try to cheer her. She is very upset about the poster. An-Yi visits her everyday and tells her that classes have resumed. They are studying documents of Mao and the Central Committee. An-Yi says there are so many posters, that people would never see the one with her name.

The Red Successors are the younger version of the Red Guards and each class would elect ten members. Ji-li returns to school in time for the election. Most of the posters are gone. Ji-li is nominated for election to the Red Successors. She is happy about it until another student mentions that class status should be taken into consideration. One of the students accuses Ji-li's father of being a rightist and her grandfather of being a landlord. Ji-li runs out of the classroom crying and runs home.

Ji-li tells Grandma what happened at school. Her grandmother tries to comfort her but her answers to Ji-li's questions are non committal. They next morning her father wakes her and says he is taking the three children for a walk. He explains his background to his children and how his family was wealthy at one time. He says that what happened many years ago is not the fault of the children.

Do-Hai and Yin Lan-lan are elected to the Red Successors. These are the two people who always taunt Ji-li and An-Yi. When she addresses a classmate by the nickname of Pauper, she is told that she is looking down on the girl and must remold herself because of her landlord grandfather and rightist father. She is told to meet the Red Successors after class.

The Red Successors lecture her and tell her she has a serious problem with her class standing. She starts to cry and they tell her to go home.



# The Sound of Drums and Gongs, pgs. 80-99

## The Sound of Drums and Gongs, pgs. 80-99 Summary and Analysis

As the campaign to Destroy the Four Olds continues, personal possessions are included in the list of fourolds. Search parties would search people's homes. Their presence was announced by the sound of drums and gongs. Ji-li and Ji-yun go outside to watch them at the house of a neighbor. Their grandmother comes to bring them back to the house telling them they must remain inside. When Ji-li is sent to the store that afternoon, she stops to read the poster on the neighbor's house. People are talking about the items carried out of the house.

That day, six more searches are carried out in their alley. They learn some of the details from Ji-yung and Son Po-po. Ji-li is lonely because An-Yi has been sent to her grandparents for the summer because of the turmoil in Shanghai. As conditions worsened, they had to dismiss Song Po-po. Ji-li now helps out with the housework and when grandma is sick, takes over the cooking. She is glad to do this.

When Grandma asks to be taken to the clinic when mom returns, the children say they can take her. They borrow a pedicab and manage to get grandma to the clinic and back.

Dad is often away at late night meetings at the theater. Often when he comes home, he and Mom talk in the bathroom. Dad decides to paint the four red leather trunks that were part of Grandma's dowry so they aren't considered fourolds. They show the children the silk and satin clothes that are in the trunk and explain how they belong to their ancestors. Since the clothes are considered fourolds, Grandma and Mom say they will use them to make comforters.

When Ji-yun asks if the Red Guards will search their house, mom says it is possible. She tells the children that if they do, it has nothing to do with them and they could not worry.





# The Propaganda Wall, pgs. 100-117

## The Propaganda Wall, pgs. 100-117 Summary and Analysis

There is a propaganda wall at the end of the alley. This is where pictures and posters appeared. The wall is repainted with a picture of Mao. People go to the wall to confess their guilt. They are taunted by others. There is a Neighborhood Dictatorship Group run by a man named Six Fingers, which suggests the names of families to be in the Black Category. The Group patrols the neighborhood. Six Fingers is very cocky because of his position.

Ji-li and Ji-yung attend a lecture by Jia Hong-yu. She is a Red Guard who led a team on a march to the countryside. Jia Hong-yu explains how she traveled against her parents' consent. She tells of the meeting in Beijing with other Red Guards. There were tens of thousands of Red Guards in Tiananmen Square for Mao's appearance.

When the Red Guards ask to borrow the bicycle of one of the neighbors and he refuses, they drag the man out of his house and force him to kneel on a wooden washboard. When the old man's wife tries to give him water, they kick the cup from her hand. Ji-li tells Grandma about the incident. When she starts to feel sorry for the man, she reminds herself that he is a counter revolutionary who would not support the Red Guards. Ji-li watches from her balcony for the rest of the afternoon. When the old man faints, the Red Guards carry him in the house.

The next day she learns that An-Yi's grandmother committed suicide by jumping out of a window. Ji-li had visited her a few days ago to ask when An-Yi would return from Shandong. Ji-li attends her memorial service.



# A Search in Passing, pgs. 118-139

## A Search in Passing, pgs. 118-139 Summary and Analysis

Uncle Tian and Aunt Wu, colleagues of Dad, come to visit. Instead of the usual jovial time when they visited, their discussions are hushed and quiet. The children are sent downstairs to their aunts so the adults could talk. When the children are allowed to return, Dad tells them that the next day they are going on a picnic with their grandmother.

The next day they find a shady place in the park for Grandma to sit while the children play. At lunch time, they eat the food they brought with. The younger children nap after lunch. Ji-li notices that Grandma is pale. She says it is just worry about the search and Dad thought a day in the park would be relaxing for her. They have worked out a signal. If there is a mop on the balcony, it is safe to return home.

That night the children are sent outside after dinner so the adults could talk. When they return to the apartment, Ji-li smells smoke. Her parents are burning pictures because they are considered fourolds.

Ji-li spends the next few days sitting in the park with Grandma. The younger children stayed with Fourth Aunt. Ji-li is confused by the Cultural Revolution. She knows she could never hate Grandma for being a landlord's wife.

One day Ji-yung comes home after being in a fight. Some boys stole his cap while he was catching crickets. The next night, he arrives home late having obviously been in a fight but proud because he retrieved his cap.

The next morning, Soon Po-po tells them that a knife was found in the trash along with practically burned photos. They know that there would be searches. Late that night, the Red Guards come and search the home of Fourth Aunt. Then they come to Ji-li's apartment. The twelve guards are led by Six Fingers. Ji-li's stamp collection is among the items confiscated. The children are put in the bathroom for the rest of the search. They remain there until the Red Guards leave.

When An-Yi comes to visit, they both realize what it means to have bad class status.



## **Fate, pgs. 140-155**

### **Fate, pgs. 140-155 Summary and Analysis**

The younger children return to school, but not Ji-li. There are no teachers for her classes. Ji-li is bored but still worries about the fate of her family. An-Yi's mother, a teacher, faces daily criticism sessions at her school where she is beaten as well as humiliated. There is no way for Ji-li and others to escape hearing and seeing this.

One day Ji-yun begins crying because she lost her schoolbag. Ji-li and Grandma ask her what happened. She tells the boys in her class called her a black whelp and threw it out the window. She is being bullied by three boys. Ji-li gives her the school bag and pencil box she purchased for junior high school and says she will take her shopping for what she needs.

Ji-li goes to visit An-Yi. Her mother is still having a difficult time at school. They are very worried about her. Ji-li blames her landlord grandfather for all her problems.



# Junior High School At Last, pgs. 156-172

## Junior High School At Last, pgs. 156-172 Summary and Analysis

Ji-li finally begins junior high school. She and An Yi are happy to see their classmates. They have been out of school for more than a year. Ji-li and An Yi both hope that Du Hai will stay away from them.

Ji-li doesn't know any of the students in her class and is happy because no one will know about her class status. The teacher Zhang Xin introduces himself. He explains what they will study the first two weeks and then dismisses the class.

Ji-li studies English, which she finds boring. She is excited at the beginning of classes but now finds herself bored. There are no textbooks and the only subject she likes is mathematics. The teachers have to combine practical experience with education. This means lecturing on how to raise pigs.

Both of Ji-li's parents are having problems at work and her father is sent to a political science class. He comes home late at night and he and mom go to the bathroom to talk. Ji-li wonders what her father has done.

One day Ji-li is asked to stay after class along with Bai Shan. Ji-li is nervous for the rest of the class. She is so nervous that she does not try, saying she has to go home and make dinner.



# Locked Up, pgs. 173 - 190

## Locked Up, pgs. 173 - 190 Summary and Analysis

Late one night during winter vacation, Fan Wen-chong, one of Dad's theater friends comes to their house. Ji-li answers the door and finds his face bloody and swollen. Ji-li runs to her room crying while the others tend to Uncle Fan's injuries. When Grandma puts the children to bed, she tells them not to say anything of what happened.

Ji-li listens to the adults talking. It seems that Uncle Fan made up a story to stop the beatings.

Dad comes home late one night and talks with Mom and Grandma. He says he can't take it anymore. He says he can't confess because he has nothing to confess. They discuss the situation.

On Chinese New Year, Ji-li learns her father did not come home the previous night. Grandma is crying. Ji-li is sent to the telephone kiosk to call Uncle Tian to see if he has news of her father. He mentions there was a problem at the meeting and then hangs up.

It is Ji-li's fourteenth birthday and she is not happy. Mom is called to work at her store and Grandmas insists that Ji-li accompany her. Ji-li hears them telling her mother that her father's unit had to have good evidence to take the steps that they took. Her mother's refusal to help is not a good sign. They threaten her with action and say their salaries remain cut until she decides to cooperate.

After a week, Mom sends Ji-li with fresh clothes for Dad. She goes to the Children's Art Theater. She is afraid but agrees to go. When she arrives, she is told that she cannot see her father but can leave the items she brought. They allow her to see her father who is carrying a large concrete pipe with three other men. She is told that he is being remolded through physical labor.

Afterward, the man talks to Ji-li saying her parents have committed a serious crime. He wants her to break with her parents and inform. He tells her to think about it.



# **An Educable Child, pgs. 191 - 205**

## **An Educable Child, pgs. 191 - 205 Summary and Analysis**

Ji-li stays home from school to help her mother and Grandmother. Her mother suffers from Meniere's disease. One of her classmates, Lin-lin comes to visit. There is a meeting the next day and the teacher wants her to attend. Before Lin-lin leaves, Ji-li tells her about her father being detained for interrogation. Lin-lin replies that her house was also searched.

Ji-li attends the meeting which is about Chairman Jin's intention to make a Class Education Exhibition. They want to expose the evils of the class enemies and point out the miseries of the old society. All of the students there have been selected for their academics and political excellence. Ji-li wonders about this statement and talks to Teacher Zhang. She says there are other students in the class who would make better guides. He tells her that she is educable and can overcome her family background. She decides she will do it.

Ji-li works on the Class Education Exhibit. There are many hours of work involved and sometimes the students work all night. They take turns sleeping. Ji-li wonders about Dad while she works. The students finish their pictures in time for school the next morning.



# Half City Hangs, pgs. 206 - 217

## Half City Hangs, pgs. 206 - 217 Summary and Analysis

One morning Uncle Tien tells the family that Dad has been cleared of the charges of listening to a foreign radio. Uncle Zhe made up the story thinking it would be easier on him. They are all happy that Dad is coming home.

Dad arrives and they all greet him. However, there are two men with him and he says he has come to pick up clothes. He has been gone for three months and he cries as he packs his clothes. Then they all begin to cry. He leaves with the two men.

One day a man and woman leave the apartment as Ji-li walks in. Mom tells her about an article in the Workers' Revolt about the Jiangs being a big landowning family. She asks Ji-li to buy a copy of the paper for her. The people who had come to visit were investigators asking questions about relatives. Ji-li thinks about how this will affect him at school and says that she hates her landlord family. Mom starts to cry.

Ji-li walks past the police station on her way home from school. She looks in one day and enters. She tells Comrade Ma that she wants to change her name. He tells her that it is good that she wants to make a break with her black family. She couldn't choose her family but she can choose her future. Comrade Ma says if she has problems with her parents to let him know and he will report them to their work units.

This is more than Ji-li is prepared for. She wants to break with the landlords of the past, not with Mom and Dad. Ji-li runs out of the police station while Comrade Ma is out of the room. She wonders how she could have been so selfish.



# **The Class Education Exhibition, pgs. 218 - 229**

## **The Class Education Exhibition, pgs. 218 - 229 Summary and Analysis**

Ji-li is nervous about the Class Education Exhibition, especially after the article in Workers' Revolt. Her family is being talked about. She decides to do a good job to prove herself. She moves many people to tears with her presentation. She is congratulated by Chairman Jin. Ji-li knows that she accomplished what she wanted to.

A few days later, Ji-li is called from class by a member of the Revolutionary Committee. The foreman from her father's theater wants to talk to her in what is called a study session. He explains that her father has serious problems and that he refuses to confess his mistakes during the Antirightist Movement. His work group won't tolerate this and plans a class struggle meeting to force him to confess. They want Ji-li to testify against her father.

The pressure Ji-li and she says her father was never critical of Chairman Mao or the Communist Party. If she defends her father, she will be considered an enemy of the people. They will hold study sessions with her brother and sister.

The next day is the opening of the Exhibition. Ji-li tries not to think about the study session as she goes to school for the briefing session. When she enters the room, she is told that she has been replaced by another student because of her political situations.





# The Rice Harvest, pgs. 230 - 243

## The Rice Harvest, pgs. 230 - 243 Summary and Analysis

Three days after her expulsion from the Exhibition, she receives a message that Chang Hong wants to talk to her at the Red Guard Committee. Ji-li reports for the meeting. Chang Hong knows that Ji-li requested summer labor in the factories instead of in the countryside. Ji-li explains that the reason is her mother's illness. Chang Hong says it would be best for Ji-li's future if she works in the country. Ji-li agrees to work in the country.

Ji-li works in the rice harvest. Each worker is assigned five rows. Like the others, she mostly works and sleeps. Ji-li finds that she is slower than the others. She accidentally cuts her leg with the sickle. She has to finish her quota or she will be disgraced so she wraps a towel around her leg.

Bai-Shan, one of her classmates, appears and says he will help her cut the rice. He tries to soothe her so she stops crying and tells her to rest while he finishes her quota. She says that she doesn't want his help. He walks away.

Ji-li awakens feeling sick. She is determined to remold herself and goes to the fields. She works at the thresher and tries to think of cool things in the sweltering heat. She finally loses consciousness and when she regains consciousness, she is in an empty storage shed.

Chang-Hong arrives to tell her that she has to return to Shanghai. The people from Dad's work group want more study sessions with her.



# The Incriminating Letter, Sweeping, Epilogue, pgs. 244 - 272

## The Incriminating Letter, Sweeping, Epilogue, pgs. 244 - 272 Summary and Analysis

Ji-li is happy to be home in Shanghai. While she is lying in bed, Mom and Uncle Tian are talking in the bathroom. Ji-li reads a letter she finds on her mother's bed. The letter is to the Municipal Party Committee and complains about conditions in the theater. They want the work unit investigated for its tactics. The letter is signed as 'The Revolutionary Masses.'

Ji-li thinks about the letter and its implications. She wonders if her father has really done anything wrong. Mom starts yelling about the letter saying the theater people are coming to search their home. She tells Ji-li to hide the letter. She hides the letter in the cat's litter box just as the search committee arrives at the door.

Dad is accused of being a landlord and Mom is accused of being a landlord's wife. They know that an important letter has been hidden and want to know where. Ji-li wonders who reported them. The men slap Grandma and force her to kneel facing the wall. When the men leave the room, Ji-li tells Mom where the letter is hidden.

The men find the letter. Mom is told to report to her work unit in the morning. They tell Ji-li that they will inform her school that she cannot be educated and then leave.

Mom says they have to inform Uncle Tian about what has happened. Song Po-po volunteers to go but finds there are guards at the entrance to the alley. Ji-yung offers to climb over the back wall. When the boy returns, he says that no one was home at Uncle Tian's house.

In Sweeping, their home is barren several weeks after the search. They are sleeping on straw mats. Life is very difficult for them. Ji-li is managing the household and still being forced to study sessions at school. She worries about her family. Mom makes her promise to take care of her brother and sister if anything happens to her or Grandma.

In the Epilogue, Ji-li explains how they were all brainwashed at the time. They were subject to control of all aspects of their life. People did not realize this until after Mao's death in 1976. The Cultural Revolution was basically the result of a power struggle at the top levels of the Party.

In the thirty years following the Cultural Revolution, Ji-li moves to the United States.

In the months following the search of their apartment, a different group took control at the theater and dad and others are released. The family still had class status problems.

The children are denied careers in the theater, Ji-li and Ji-yun become teachers and Ji-yun works in a watch factory.

Dad is finally cleared of all charges in 1980. Grandma dies in 1992 and the rest of the family moves to the United States. Few people were punished for what they did during the Cultural Revolution.



# Characters

## Ji-li Jiang

Ji-li Jiang is born on the Chinese New Year in 1954. Her name means Lucky and beautiful and her parents gave her that name because they wanted her to be the happiest girl in the world. She was happy until she was selected to audition for a dance training class at the Central Liberation Army Arts Academy and her father tells her she can't because her family can't pass the political background investigation. Like other school children, she is indoctrinated in ideology in school and is proud to be working toward the goals of the new China. Ji-li lives in a large room with her parents, grandmother, housekeeper, Song Po-po and brother and sister. Her brother Ji-yong is eleven and one year younger than her while her sister, Ji-yun is two years younger. Her parents had been actors. Even though Ji-li supports the goals of the new China, she finds it difficult to do some of the things that are required of her, such as criticizing her teachers. As the Cultural Revolution continues, her family's problems increased. Her father is detained and his work group tries to cajole her into testifying against him. She has problems at school, especially when her father is detained and she is forced to submit to study sessions. With her mother and grandmother sick, she must manage the household. She is pressured to testify against her father but refuses to. After her father is released, they still have problems and she is not allowed to become an actress. She moves to the United States in 1984 after her father is cleared. She graduates from the University of Hawaii in 1987. She works in the hotel and health care business before opening her own business, the East West Exchange.

## Jiang Xi-reng

Jiang Xi-reng is the father of Ji-li. He was born into a large wealthy family. His family had been wealthy landowners with more than one hundred people representing five generations living together in a large compound. The family owned many different businesses. Dad's father dies when he is seven years of age and he is raised by his mother. The family did not have much money left by the time he was college age so he receives a scholarship to St. John's University in Shanghai. He worked as a private tutor to earn money and graduated in 1949. At this time, Mao had just liberated China. Dad is appointed as a vice-principal at a primary school. He and his wife had both been active in the theater and they are still in contact with many people involved in the theater. He met his wife who was an actress who retired when they married. They have three children, Ji-li, who is twelve, Ji-yung who is eleven, and Ji-yun who is ten. The children were never aware of any political problems until Ji-li was chosen to audition for the Central Liberation Army Arts Academy. He had to tell her not to audition because their family could not pass the political background investigation. When she is nominated for the Red Successors, he is accused of being a Rightist. He tries to explain to his children that what happened was many years ago and does not concern them. His situation worsens and he is detained for several months with his work unit trying to force Ji-li to



testify against him. He and others are released after a change in personnel at his work unit. In 1980, he is cleared of all charges. He immigrates to the United States with his family.

## An-Yi

An-Yi is the best friend of Ji-li. They have known each other since they were babies. An-Yi is in the same school class as Ji-li and experiences some of the same difficulties as Ji-li does. She also finds it difficult to write posters criticizing her teachers. Since Ji-li is her best friend, she often sides with her in discussions with other students. It is An-Yi who tells Ji-li that her name is mentioned in a poster. Then she mentions that her own mother has been denounced in a poster. The two girls often console and advise one another. An-Yi is usually the first to learn about different events or situations and then tells Ji-li. She tries to adhere to the ideology they are being taught about the fourolds and the events that are happening around them. One of her classmates accuses her of being guilty of the fourolds for using skin cream and wearing a braid and she does not understand why.

## Ji-yung

Ji-yung is the younger brother of Ji-li. He does not like to be pushed around and often gets into fights. He wanted to become a trumpeter but could not because of his class status. He works at a watch factory until he moves to the United States and settles in Seattle. He works in the tourist industry.

Song Po-po was the nanny of Ji-li and her siblings and then became the family housekeeper. She was from a wealthy family but her husband lost all of his money and committed suicide. The family has to dismiss her as the Destroy the Four Olds campaign intensifies.

## Ji-yun

Ji-yun is the younger sister of Ji-li. She wanted to become a singer but could not because of her family's class status. She becomes a teacher and moves to the United States. She marries and teaches at a Seattle area community college. Her parents live with her and her family.

## Grandma

Grandma is the mother of Ji-li's father. Her husband had been a wealthy property owner but died after eight years of marriage. She raises her son and lives with his family after he marries. She dies in 1992 at the age of ninety-eight.



## **Chong Hong**

Chong Hong is a member of the Red Guards at Ji-li's school. She works with Ji-li in the Class Education Exhibition project until Ji-li is replaced. She advises Ji-li to do her summer work in the countryside because it will do more to improve her class status.

## **Six Fingers**

Six Fingers is a part of the Neighborhood Dictatorship Group. They patrol the neighborhood and perform house searches and takes part in a search of the Jiang house.

## **Chen Ying**

Chen Ying is the mother of Ji-li. She met her husband when she was an actress. She quits acting when they marry. She has three children, Ji-li, Ji-yung, and Ji-yun.

## **Six Fingers**

Six Fingers is a part of the Neighborhood Dictatorship Group. They patrol the neighborhood and perform house searches and takes part in a search of the Jiang house.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Shanghai**

Shanghai is a city on the eastern coast of China.

### **Nanjing Road**

Nanjing Road is the busiest shopping street in Shanghai.

### **Six Er Primary School**

Six Er Primary School is located in Shanghai and is where Ji-li and her brother and sister attend school.

### **Jiang Apartment**

Jiang Apartment is the large room where Ji-li and her family live located on a street they call the alley.

### **Grandpa Hong's Bookstall**

Grandpa Hong's Bookstall is a book rental stall located near Ji-li's home.

### **The Park**

The Park is located near the Jiang apartment and is where Grandma and the children sit when they fear the Red Guards will search their home.

### **Xin She Junior High School**

Xin She Junior High School is where Ji-li attends junior high school when classes resume.

### **Children's Art Theater**

Children's Art Theater is on Jua-shan road and is where Jiang Xi-reng works and is held.



## **Rice Field**

Rice Field outside Shanghai is where Ji-li is sent to do her summer work.

## **Aunt Xi-wen House**

Aunt Xi-wen House is one of the houses that Ji-li's student group was forced to place posters on.





# Themes

## Fear

Fear is one of the themes of the book. The period of the Cultural Revolution was a time of fear, confusion, and violence in which the rules and traditions of the Chinese society break down. Teenagers and college students roam the streets and accost people if they think they are dressed wrong. The Red Guards conduct searches of people's homes, as they do the Jiangs. They live in fear of the searches and Grandma and the children sit in the park all day long. The family has a signaling system with a map to indicate whether or not it is safe to come home. Ji-li and her family spend the better part of two years living in fear, especially once her father is detained. He has to attend late night meetings at the theater where he is criticized, ridiculed and pressured to confess. The family always feared that he would not come home until one night he did not. When he is detained, they cannot see him and do not know if he is being beaten and tortured. Ji-li is pressured to testify against him as is her mother and her mother becomes ill because of the situation. Since the rules of the society have broken down, the biggest fear is the fear of the unknown. People never know what is going to happen. Parents have to be careful of what they say in front of their children since they can't be sure that the children wouldn't repeat it. The fear dominates the society of the time during the years of the Cultural Revolution and wrecked many families and lives.

## Loyalty

Loyalty is another dominant theme of the book. The new China demands loyalty from its citizens. People continually have to prove their loyalty to the Party and to Chairman Mao in various ways. People are forced to choose between their families and the Party. Friends inform on friends as Uncle Zhu did when he said that Jiang Xi-reng listened to foreign radio broadcasts. Uncle Zhu thought that the committee would feel that he was cooperating when he told them that. As a result, Ji-li's father is detained, even though he did nothing wrong. Children are pressured by their peers. Many children inform on and denounce their own parents during this period of chaos. Jiang-Xi-reng's work unit is pressuring Ji-li to testify against her father. She is subjected to study sessions at school where she is intimidated and pressured. She has to return to Shanghai from work in the countryside for this purpose. The authorities tell her that she has to break with her family and remold herself to overcome her class status if she wants to succeed in the new China. Ji-li found that she could not do many of the things that are demanded of her. She could not make up lies and write bad things about her teachers. She found it difficult to be in the group that posterized the home of one of her relatives. Even though her grandmother had been the life of a landlord, she could not do anything that would hurt her grandmother or family. She refuses to testify against her father.



## Confusion

A third theme of the book is confusion. The years of the Cultural Revolution are years of chaos in which the traditional rules and customs of the society break down. The cause of this is a power struggle at the upper levels of the Communist Party, but the people did not know this until years later. People are indoctrinated at work and children are indoctrinated at school. They try to conform to the Party doctrine but they do not always know what it is and how to conform to it. The children are more susceptible to the indoctrination than the adults are and it is a very confusing time for them as evidenced by the confusion of Ji-li. She and her family have a class status problem because their grandfather, who had been dead for more than thirty years, had been a landlord. The family could not pass a political background investigation. This means that Ji-li could not take part in many activities such as the Red Successors. She is replaced as a guide in the Class Education Exhibition because she wouldn't testify against her father. Ji-li is in the twelve to fourteen-year-old age bracket when all of this takes place. She does not understand why she is being asked to do some of the things that are demanded of her. Her grandmother was the wife of a landlord and her father the son of a landlord and this is condemned by the new China. At some points she feels that she hates them for her class status, but she cannot turn against them.



# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of the book, *Red Scarf Girl*, is the perspective of the author, Ji-li Jiang. Ji-li, who was twelve to fourteen years old at the time, tells her story of the years of the Cultural Revolution and what it was like for her and her family. The book is written in the first-person point of view with the author, Ji-li Jiang, functioning as the narrator. Although the use of the first person limits the knowledge of the reader to the events that occur in the presence of the narrator, this approach works well for this book because it allows the reader to see the events and situation through the eyes of Ji-li. The reader learns about things as she does and can understand her confusion and emotions. In a book of this kind, it does not matter that the reader has to knowledge of events that take place outside of the scope of the narrator. The reader learns about events as Ji-li learns about them.

Ji-li Jiang is well qualified to write a book this kind because she and her family lived through this difficult period in China. She is telling her own story of what happened to her and her family and what the Cultural Revolution did to them and others. She presents the confusion of the time as people were forced to choose between the Party and their family and friends. The use of the first person point of views allows Ji-li to discuss her emotion and what she was thinking at the time. It is very appropriate for this book.

## Tone

The tone of the book, *Red Scarf Girl*, is subjective and this is quite appropriate for the book. Ji-li Jiang is telling the story of what happened to her and her family during the years of the Cultural Revolution. She is twelve years of age in 1966 when the Cultural Revolution begins and had been quite happy with her life. When she is selected for a dance audition at the Central Liberation Army Arts Academy, she is overjoyed with the honor of being able to serve Chairman Mao and the new China. Then she finds that her grandmother and parents do not share her excitement. They tell her that she cannot audition because there will be a political background investigation that her family will not be able to pass. This is a disappointment and shock to the child who always thought she had a bright future. This is a turning point in her life for the disappointments, fears and confusion of the coming two years, which Ji-li explains in her own words. She expresses her views and emotions in the book as she struggles through this difficult period in the history of Communist China. This is why the tone is appropriate for the book. The reader can understand what Ji-li and her family suffered through and the confusion that she and others felt as they determined their loyalties and priorities during the Cultural Revolution. The tone is not that critical of the government and does not beg for sympathy, which the reader has to appreciate. It is just Ji-li telling her story.

## Structure

The structure of the book is simple. It is divided into chapters, each with a title that pertains to the subject matter of the chapter. There are no chapter numbers. The seventeen chapters vary in length from five to twenty two pages. There is a short Prologue in which Ji-li explains the happiness of her life up until the time of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. There is also an Epilogue in which she explains what happened to many of the characters after the Cultural Revolution. She and her family immigrated to the United States.

There is a Table of Contents showing the chapter titles and page numbers. There is an Acknowledgments section in which she mentions the people who were significant to her writing the book. In the Note to the Reader, she explains the use of Chinese surnames and how people are addressed in China. There is a Note on Pronunciation in which Ji-li explains the pronunciation of some Chinese words. The Foreword is written by David Henry Hwang who explains how Red Scarf Girl helps people understand the experience of the Cultural Revolution. Finally, there is a Glossary at the back of the book which provides thorough explanations of the words and terms used in the book, many of which are peculiar to the Cultural Revolution. The reader will find the Glossary very useful and easy to refer to.

The book is structured for quick and easy reading, which the reader will appreciate.



## Quotes

"I was born on Chinese New Year. Carefully, my parents chose my name: Ji-li, meaning lucky and beautiful. They hoped that I would be the happiest girl in the world" (Prologue, pg. 1.)

"But Grandma, we have to get rid of those old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Chairman Mao said they're holding us back,' I informed her" (Four Olds, pg. 25.)

"Who would have believed that our entire educational system was wrong after all? Seventeen years after Liberation, the newspapers told us, our schools were not bringing us up to be good red socialists and communists, as we have thought, but revisionists" (Waiting, pg. 38.)

"Things like that will probably happen again because of this Cultural Revolution, so I want to tell you something about our family.' Dad's voice, like his face, was calm" (Successors, pg. 61.)

"I had never seen a search, except in the movies. I knew that they were the only way we were going to get rid of the Four Olds, once and for all. Still, there was something about the idea that made me nervous" (Drums and Gongs, pg. 82.)

"Wiping my eyes, I slowly walked home. With every step I hoped that Chairman Mao would forgive my black class status and let me be a Red Guard too" (Wall, pg. 108.)

"In the three months since the Cultural Revolution had started, changes had been so constant that I often felt lost. One day the Conservative faction were revolutionaries that defended Chairman Mao's ideas; the next day, the opposite Rebel faction became the heroes of the Cultural Revolution" (Passing, pg. 126.)

"No matter what I did and where I went, the Cultural Revolution followed me" (Fate, pg. 141.)

"None of my former classmates were in this class. No one in this class knew about my class status" (Junior High, pg. 158.)

"Then there is nothing more to say until you decide to be reasonable. I'm sure your husband's unit will resume paying his salary when he confesses, and we will return yours to its former level when you decide to cooperation" (Locked Up, pg. 184-185.)

"We cannot choose our families or our class status. But we can choose our own futures." He spoke very slowly and clearly. "No, you are not a leader, but you are still an 'educable child. You can overcome your family background" (Child, pg. 198.)

"I...I don't have a good class status. So I want to change my family name" (Half City, pg. 214.)



"Finally I had decided. Everyone already knew the worst about me. Let them think what they would. I would do an excellent job to prove myself. I had to win my honor back" (Exhibition, pg. 219.)

"But Ji-li, have you considered the importance of your political life? It's not your fault that you were born into such a family, but the class influence of your family does have an effect. This makes your task of remolding yourself harder than other people's" (Harvest, pg. 232.)

"Many friends have asked me why, after all I went through, I did not hate Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution in those years. The answer is simple: We were all brainwashed" (Epilogue, pg. 265.)

# Topics for Discussion

What is the Cultural Revolution? What is the role of Destroy the Four Olds?

Ji-li says that she was very happy until she was twelve. What happened at that point in her life that changed her life?

What are four olds? In what ways are four olds dangerous? How are they dealt with?

What are class struggle meetings? What is Ji-li's father suspected of?

What kind of pressure is Ji-li subjected to at her school? What is a study session and what is its purpose?

What does Ji-li learn about the Cultural Revolution after its end? What effect did it have on the lives of her and her family?

When Ji-li settles in the United States, why is she not happy in her career? What makes her open her own business?