

MEETING THE AUTHOR



AN INTERVIEW WITH JI-LI JIANG

Q Why did you write *Red Scarf Girl* for young people instead of adults?

A *In 1984 I moved to the States. The first year, I lived with an American family. They were very interested in my life in China. Using my limited English, I shared some of my stories with them. One day they gave me a present, a book, The Diary of Anne Frank. Inside they wrote: "In the hope that one day we will read the diary of Ji-li Jiang." Of course, I was very moved by the story, and also, I was inspired to write my own story through a little girl's eyes, instead of as an adult looking back. Honestly speaking, I didn't target my readers before I wrote it, but I am glad it turned out to be a children's book. I used to be a teacher in China. If my book has an impact on the kids who read it, I will feel most rewarded.*

Q What lessons have you learned from living in China during the Cultural Revolution?

A *I have learned a lot from the Cultural Revolution, including the fact that real life is not a pink rose garden and everyone will experience difficulties. Also, we should never blindly believe anyone or anything, and we should forgive those who hurt us. But the most important thing I have learned is that when things get tough and confused, we should always trust and follow our own hearts, not yield to the pressure we are under, and remember to never give up.*

Q There are many devastating scenes in *Red Scarf Girl*. What is your most vivid memory from that time period?

A *I still can't forget the time the people from my father's theater came to my school to push me to denounce my father in a struggle meeting. I don't remember every detail very well because of the overwhelming fear I felt. But that horrified feeling is still so vivid, that even now I can still feel the pain when I think about it. I didn't know what to do after they left. I remember standing in the narrow passageway between the school building and the schoolyard wall. I was so desperate, and hopeless, that I couldn't even cry. I finally called my mother's "little brother" who my mother had taken care of when he was young. I waited for him in a small ice-cream shop where we both felt safe. He came in and sat across the small dirty table from me. Incoherently, I told him what had happened. He listened carefully but did not say anything right away. He then took out a handkerchief and wiped his glasses. I remember his eyes looked small and swollen without the glasses. "Maybe they will not come back," he said uncertainly. I realized that he did not have any answers either. I felt exhausted immediately. My face must have shown my disappointment and despair, because he bought me a four-cent Popsicle before he left. I'll never forget that day.*

Q Why did you leave China?

A *After the Cultural Revolution, things didn't change much. Rigid policies and restrictions kept me from achieving my dream: to enter the Shanghai Drama Institute. I was not allowed to audition. When the universities re-opened, I passed the exam, but because of my family's political situation, I was only accepted into a less prestigious university. After frustration upon frustration, when America opened the door to students from China, I decided to go to the United States. At that time, my only option was to go overseas and study in America.*

Q How do young people respond to *Red Scarf Girl*?

A *I gave a speech at the University of California at Berkeley early this year. After my presentation, five or six girls came up to me and hugged me. One girl even had tears in her eyes. They thanked me for sharing this difficult experience with them. In the last eight months I have received a lot of positive feedback. One girl said to me, "My boss is Chinese, but I've never paid any attention to what he told me about China. I know I have so many questions for him now." A student from Hawaii Community College wrote: "I had no idea the Cultural Revolution happened. This is something everybody should hear about." I think that even though my life was so different from theirs, kids can relate to my story. We still have things in common, like dealing with pressure, with family, and so on. I think they can see the connections that make the book less foreign than it would seem.*

Q Ji-li means "lucky and beautiful", a name your parents carefully selected for you. Do you consider yourself lucky?

A *Yes, I consider myself quite lucky. Despite everything I experienced in China, I have never lacked for love, from my family, my friends, and also God. After surviving the Cultural Revolution, I find myself more sensitive to the beauty of nature and the human spirit. I am grateful for having my mind in peace, grateful to have experienced other cultures and lifestyles, and especially grateful that I have been able to do something meaningful and enjoyable to me.*

Ji-li Jiang was born in Shanghai, China, in 1954. She was a science teacher before she came to the United States in 1984. In 1992 she started her own company, East West Exchange, to promote cultural exchange between Western countries and China. She lives in the San Francisco area. This is her first book.



RED SCARF GIRL
A MEMOIR OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION
 by Ji-li Jiang

1998 Notable Children's Books (ALA)
 1998 Best Books for Young Adults (ALA)
 1998 Notable Children's Trade Books in Social Studies (NCSS/CBC)
 1997 Books for Youth Editors' Choice (*Booklist*)
 Best Book of 1997 (*Publishers Weekly*)
 1998 Parents' Choice Gold Award
 Lasting Connections of 1997 (*Book Links*)
 Nonfiction Honor List (*VOYA*)

Trophy ISBN 0-06-446208-0 \$4.95

More Harper Trophy Children's Books About Courage and Meeting Challenges



Journey to Jo'burg
 by Beverley Naidoo

Trophy 0-06-440237-1 • \$4.95



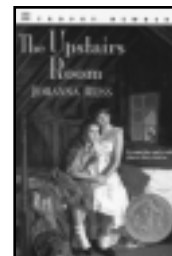
Dragon's Gate
 by Laurence Yep

Trophy 0-06-440489-7 • \$4.95



Dragonwings
 by Laurence Yep

Trophy 0-06-440085-9 • \$4.95



The Upstairs Room
 by Johanna Reiss

Trophy 0-06-440370-X • \$4.95



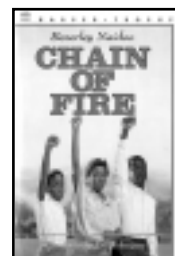
Grab Hands and Run
 by Frances Temple

Trophy 0-06-440548-6 • \$4.95



The Endless Steppe
 by Esther Hautzig

Trophy 0-06-440577-X • \$4.95



Chain of Fire
 by Beverley Naidoo

Trophy 0-06-440468-4 • \$4.95



<http://www.harperchildrens.com/schoolhouse>
 ISBN: 0-06-449421-7

A Guide to Teaching Ji-li Jiang's ***Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution***



READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Evaluate Fact and Opinion
Make Judgments and Decisions
Recognize Point of View
Understand Cause and Effect

THEMES

Courage
Friendship
Meeting Challenges
Turning Points

Ji-li Jiang was twelve years old in 1966—the year the Cultural Revolution began in China. *Red Scarf Girl* is her heart-wrenching account of the Revolution—an unforgettable portrait of a young girl torn between her love for both country and family. According to Jiang, the book is an effort

to “Do something for the little girl I had been, and for all the children who lost their childhoods as I did” (page 266). Told with simplicity and grace, this powerful memoir recalls one of the most terrifying times in Chinese history.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Until the spring of 1966 Ji-li believed that her life and family were nearly perfect. She was loved dearly by her family, was an outstanding student in school, and was admired by her teachers and peers. But most important to Ji-li was her belief in the Communist credo: “Heaven and earth are great, but greater still is the kindness of the Communist Party; father and mother are dear, but dearer still is Chairman Mao” (page 1).

Because Ji-li and her family had always done what their government expected of them, they had always been in good standing. However, the status of Ji-li and her family changed rapidly with the onset of the Cultural Revolution and its radical new value system. Ji-li soon found that neither her intelligence, hard work, nor loyalty to the Communist Party mattered to Chairman Mao Ze-dong and the aggressive Red Guards. When the old ways and ideas were suddenly deemed undesirable, anyone who exemplified or had ties to them became suspect. Because Ji-li’s family was financially comfortable and her grandfather had been a landlord, she and her family were perceived as “Black,” meaning opposed to the Communist Party. They were publicly humiliated and scorned by former friends, and their house was searched and ransacked by the Red Guards.

The situation worsened when Ji-li’s father was taken into custody. When he refused to confess to the counterrevolutionary activities of which he had been falsely accused, the Red Guards confronted Ji-li and asked her to testify publicly against her father. It was the most heart-wrenching decision of her life: Should she denounce her family and break ties with them, or refuse to testify and risk a future in her beloved Communist China? *Red Scarf Girl* is the story of her family’s courage during this political reign of terror.



SETTING THE SCENE

The story takes place in Shanghai, China, during the onset of Chairman Mao Ze-dong's Cultural Revolution. By 1949 Mao established a Communist state by defeating the former ruling party, the Nationalists. In 1966, when Ji-li's story begins, Mao has just imposed the Cultural Revolution to cut people's ties to pre-Communist China. To lead this revolution he enlisted help—mostly high school and college students—to implement rules and to eliminate everything that suggests a bourgeois lifestyle. Having only grown up during the Communist state, many young people had little understanding of China's pre-Communist past and were aggressive about enforcing these

rules. These factions of young people became known as the Red Guards. They frequently terrorized people they felt were not good Communists, and those under suspicion often lost their positions or their memberships in the Communist Party. Many others were sent to work camps. Some were thrown in jail or even killed. *

READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Evaluate Fact and Opinion

Have students compile several of the sayings from the *da-zi-bao*, the propaganda posters criticizing the educational system. Refer students to the glossary at the back of the book if they need help with unfamiliar terms. Lead a discussion to determine whether these sayings are composed mostly of fact or of opinion.

Cite other instances in both world and U.S. history when propaganda has been used toward political ends.

Make Judgments and Decisions

Have students identify some of the most trying decisions Ji-li must make and discuss their outcomes. How are her decisions complicated by the pressure to become an “educable” child according to Communist standards and to break with her “black” family? How are Ji-li's decisions influenced by the Communist propaganda? Ask volunteers how they would have made these same choices and what their decisions would have been.

Understand Cause and Effect

Frequently, Ji-li is shocked by the fervor with which people are interrogated and humiliated for seemingly

simple things like the clothing they wear, family photographs, even using nicknames—anything that remotely represents the Four Olds. What motivates the student inspectors, the Red Guards, and other citizens to interrogate people this way? Read Ji-li's epilogue (pages 265–272) as you discuss this question.

Recognize Points of View

Ask students to consider the differences in how various characters feel throughout the Cultural Revolution, and have them write a paragraph from the perspective of one of the following characters: Ji-li's father; her brother, Ji-yong; Ji-li's friend from junior high school, Chang Hong; and Ji-li's grandmother.

* For more information about Chinese history and the Cultural Revolution check out these books at your local library or bookstore:

The Great Chinese Revolution (1800–1985) by John King Fairbank. 1987. ISBN: 0-06-039076-X (HarperCollins).

The Search for Modern China by Jonathan D. Spence. 1990. ISBN: 0393307808 (W.W. Norton).

The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution (1895–1980) by Jonathan Spence. 1982. ISBN: 0140062793 (Viking).

SHARING THE BOOK: QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- How does Ji-li's opinion about the Communist Party and its beloved leader, Mao Ze-dong, change over the course of her story? Name some of the most crucial events in the autobiography and explain how they change Ji-li's feelings about the party.
- "Destroying the Four Olds was a new battle, and an important one: It would keep China from losing her Communist ideals. Though we were not facing real guns or real tanks, this battle would be even harder, because our enemies, the rotten ideas and customs we were so used to, were inside ourselves" (pages 28–29). Ji-li reverently invokes this Communist doctrine toward the beginning of her story. How does this notion of ridding the country of the Four Olds become damaging? Who decides what is Four Olds? Discuss other instances in which leaders have tried to erase culture and history.
- Ask students to name the Four Olds and find examples of things that were destroyed by the citizens and the Red Guard because they were old. Discuss whether there is adequate justification for these classifications and for the punishment that results from them.
- Ji-li's father is taken into custody because he is accused of being a counterrevolutionary against the Communist Party. Compare and contrast how Chinese political dissidents are treated under Mao Ze-dong's rule and how dissidents were treated under Joseph Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and '30s; during the McCarthy hearings in the U.S.; in Bosnia; and in modern China.
- How do family relationships change as a result of the Cultural Revolution? Consider the passage in which Ji-li witnesses her cousin Shan-shan as he walks right past his mother, who has fallen on the street (page 142)? Does Ji-li shun her own parents in any way because of their class status? How does she overcome her desire to break with her family? Are there any circumstances which justify putting the goal of your country before that of your family? Cite examples.
- Ji-li's relationships with her classmates and teachers often become strained as they learn about her class status and her family is increasingly persecuted by the Red Guards. Compare and contrast Ji-li's relationships with the following characters: An Yi, Du Hai, Chang Hong, Teacher Gu, Song Po-po, and Bai Shan.
- Ji-li states: "Until now I had never doubted that I could achieve anything I wanted. The future had been full of infinite possibilities. Now I was no longer sure that was still true" (page 18). How are Ji-li's opportunities limited by the political upheaval caused by the Revolution? How does the political situation affect Ji-li's education, her family's financial stability, even her basic freedoms?
- Compare and contrast the events of the Chinese Cultural Revolution with events during the Russian Revolution which began in 1917; the rise of the Nazis, the Hitler Youth, and the Holocaust during World War II; and the current conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. During all these periods, how does political struggle, ethnic conflict, and economics play a part in leading to violence, war, and genocide?
- Poll the class to see who has read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Ask volunteers to cite similarities and differences between Anne Frank's story set during the Holocaust and Ji-li Jiang's account of the Cultural Revolution. How do these two personal stories convey a human side to the suffering incurred during times of war and revolution? What do they tell you about the impact of revolution on individuals? What effect have these women had on your perception of these historical periods?

ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Language Arts

Throughout the autobiography Ji-li uses terms for the various groups and institutions of the Cultural Revolution—all of which are listed in the glossary at the back of the book. Write sample journal entries describing a typical day in China for a young person in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. What activities would her or his daily routine consist of? What would school be like? Where would the student go after school? What would he or she think about the situation? Incorporate terms from the glossary in describing your day. Think about how the classifications and terms enforced by the Communist Party would affect a young person's outlook on everyday events.

In *Red Scarf Girl* Ji-li must contend with some tragic experiences. Choose one of these experiences and write a poem about it.

Social Studies

As a class, collectively create a timeline of major political events that occurred in China during the twentieth century. As you create the timeline, discuss the historical events that relate to Ji-li's story.

In the epilogue of *Red Scarf Girl* Ji-li states of the Chinese Communist Party, "Our leader had taken advantage of our trust and loyalty to manipulate the whole country. This is the most frightening lesson of the Cultural Revolution: Without a sound legal system, a small group or even a single person can take control of an entire country" (page 266). Identify other times in world history when this has occurred. Then break up into small groups and research and write reports about these events.

Discuss the political system of Communism. Refer to the definition of Communism in the glossary at the back of the book. How are resources and wealth divided in *Red Scarf Girl*? In what other countries has

Communism been implemented? Create a chart of countries that have had Communist governments. The table should include the following: date started, date ended if applicable, leaders, and major political, social, and economic events.

Art

For the Class Education Exhibition Ji-li and her classmates are given an assignment to create a poster of Mao Ze-dong. Have the class create a political poster.

During the Cultural Revolution the propaganda walls were often covered with critical statements. Have the class create a bulletin board of positive statements, headed "Things We Believe In." For example: Freedom of Speech.

Drama

Break the class into groups and have each group choose a passage from *Red Scarf Girl*, prepare a script of the passage, and then have them perform their scene. Or, have the class perform one group play, assigning some students to be the Red Guards and some to be citizens. Have them decide who and what has ties to Four Olds.

Science

Before she is called back to Shanghai, Ji-li spends some time during the summer harvesting rice. What kind of climate does rice grow in? Research China's climates and list the crops that grow in this vast country. Then draw a map and place symbols for the crops in the appropriate climate regions.