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# Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir Of The Cultural Revolution



## Synopsis

Publishers Weekly Best Book \* ALA Best Book for Young Adults \* ALA Notable Children's Book \* ALA Booklist Editors' Choice

Moving, honest, and deeply personal, *Red Scarf Girl* is the incredible true story of one girl's courage and determination during one of the most terrifying eras of the twentieth century. It's 1966, and twelve-year-old Ji-li Jiang has everything a girl could want: brains, popularity, and a bright future in Communist China. But it's also the year that China's leader, Mao Ze-dong, launches the Cultural Revolution and Ji-li's world begins to fall apart. Over the next few years, people who were once her friends and neighbors turn on her and her family, forcing them to live in constant terror of arrest. And when Ji-li's father is finally imprisoned, she faces the most difficult dilemma of her life. Written in an accessible and engaging style, this page-turning autobiography will appeal to readers of all ages, and it includes a detailed glossary and a pronunciation guide.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Grade 5-9. This autobiography details the author's experiences as a teenager during the Cultural Revolution. Though wanting to be devoted followers of Chairman Mao, Jiang and her family are subjected to many indignities because her grandfather was once a landlord. Memoirs of the period are usually larded with murders, suicides, mass brainwashing, cruel and unusual bullying, and injustices. *Red Scarf Girl* is no exception. Where Jiang scores over her comrades is in her lack of self-pity, her naive candor, and the vividness of her writing. The usual catalogue of atrocities is filtered through the sensibility of a young woman trying to comprehend the events going on around

her. Readers watch her grow from a follower into a thoughtful person who privately questions the dictates of the powers that be. She witnesses neighbors being beaten to death, her best friend's grandmother's suicide, the systematic degradation of her father, and endless public humiliations. At one point, Jiang even enters a police station to change her name in a confused attempt to dissociate herself from her branded and maligned family. She makes it very clear that the atrocities were the inevitable result of the confusion and fanaticism manipulated by unscrupulous leaders for their own petty ends. Ultimately, her resigned philosophy attaches no blame: this is what happens when power is grossly abused. The writing style is lively and the events often have a heart-pounding quality about them. *Red Scarf Girl* will be appreciated as a page-turner and as excellent discussion material for social studies curricula. John Philbrook, formerly at San Francisco Public Library Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A child's nightmare unfolds in Jiang's chronicle of the excesses of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in China in the late 1960s. She was a young teenager at the height of the fervor, when children rose up against their parents, students against teachers, and neighbor against neighbor in an orgy of doublespeak, name-calling, and worse. Intelligence was suspect, and everyone was exhorted to root out the "Four Olds"--old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. She tells how it felt to burn family photographs and treasured heirlooms so they would not be used as evidence of their failure to repudiate a "black"--i.e., land-owning--past. In the name of the revolution, homes were searched and possessions taken or destroyed, her father imprisoned, and her mother's health imperiled--until the next round of revolutionaries came in and reversed many of the dictates of the last. Jiang's last chapter details her current life in this country, and the fates of people she mentions in her story. It's a very painful, very personal--therefore accessible--history. (Memoir. 11-15) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

China's Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s was hugely disruptive, and is now universally recognized as a giant step backwards for China. This is an intimate personal memoir about the life and impressions of a young teenage girl who lived through that time. This is not just a general history of events. The author shares her feelings, fears, and concerns and those of her extended family. The story is well and simply told from a personal perspective and is an easy narrative to follow, but it ends somewhat incomplete. Ji-Li is growing up in a typical (for Chinese society) extended family, all sharing one household--the author and her two sisters, her parents, and her grandmother. At the beginning of the story, her family seems secure if not

well-off, but their fortunes fall as the sometimes-anarchic

“revolution” progresses. Although her father has a relatively uncontroversial occupation, every member of the family has been classified as a Landlord, simply because the family’s grandfather once owned property. The Cultural Revolution has labeled all people in the Landlord class as Enemies of the People, even though “landlords” as such are extinct in modern Communist China. Acquiring property to build family wealth has a long tradition in Asia, so the number of people with ancestors who owned property is obviously considerable. Asian culture is by tradition family-centered. In some countries (North Korea comes to mind as one of the more severe modern examples), the punishments for one person’s transgressions are visited on the entire family, often for several generations. These transgressions are sometimes purely political. Even if being a “landlord” was ever a crime, Ji-Li had nothing to do with it. Yet despite the fact that Ji-Li is smart, hard-working in school, and ambitious, she suffers personal humiliations and penalties simply because she is part of this family. Ji-Li is not anti-government, and wants to be a part of Mao’s revolution, but it won’t let her unless she is ultimately willing to make a difficult choice. Ji-Li’s fortune almost fails her a few times, but in general she remains optimistic and determined. She is remarkably steadfast for such a young person. The story ends on a positive but mixed note, and it is clear that her experiences are not over yet. Although I am an older adult and found that this easily held my interest, I also think this is definitely appropriate, interesting, and accessible reading for even young teens.

This is NOT a book about the "big picture" of what happened in Communist China during the Cultural Revolution. Rather, it is a memoir of the lives of a young girl and her family and her friends' families. For the Chinese people, society's rules about what is good and bad were reversed, first when the Communists conquered China in 1949, and then the reversal was emphasized seventeen years later, when the Cultural Revolution began. The result was that families who, before Communism, had worked hard and intelligently and had prospered suddenly became national enemies. Even those who had chosen not to flee China, out of a strong sense of Chinese patriotism, like the author's parents and grandparents, were declared by the state to be "enemies of the people". Even worse, no way was allowed for such a family to "make up" for its past, and even the children who were born into Communism, like the author and her siblings and friends, were declared

to be guilty of the "crimes" of their ancestors. For the author, the Cultural Revolution was a turning point in her life. Until then, her parents and grandmother had kept their heads down and been left alone, but now they were denounced and actively persecuted. What the author was seeing daily in her life conflicted with the propaganda she was getting at school, which, before, she had accepted without question. Now her confusion kept increasing, as she tried to make sense of her new world. Finally, she was told bluntly that she had to choose between her country and her family, and only if she publicly rejected her family could she have the life she had always expected to have. Of course this was an agonizing decision, and took much time, but she finally made her choice. The book is well-written, and does an excellent job of showing life in this tumultuous time as seen by a highly intelligent girl who was only twelve years old when the Cultural Revolution began. I highly recommend it.

"Red Scarf Girl" by Ji-li Jiang ... 4-stars! I'll be honest... I wanted to give this a five-star rating, but the writing itself was just not up to that caliber. It was, however, an interesting and informative story of Chinese families enduring the harsh conditions of the Mao Revolution in China. It's also a very interesting and informative human history of how easily people can be 'brainwashed' into believing half-truths and lies. This story reminds me a little of another similar story, "The Plum Tree" set in Germany before and during Nazi Germany and war. Many normal, peace-loving Germans were also 'brainwashed' by Hitler and his henchmen. Humans can be so easily turned, one group against another - it's happened so many times in our past history, and it'll be done again and again in our future. Sad, truly sad. Patrick

This is an intimate story of one 12 year old girl, her family and friends during Chairman Mao's cultural revolution in China. Ji-li has a clear and concise way of telling her story so truthfully it almost hurts. Yet, the story is filled with her deep emotions, conflicts, terrors and despair. I could not put this book down and would recommend it for reading by everyone but especially by school children for better understanding of our countries.

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