

No Place to Escape: Explaining the Cultural Revolution to American Students

Ji-li Jiang

Last October, I took my parents from the Bay Area to New York City to spend a few days with my nephew, a freshman who just entered Columbia University. During our mini vacation, my father's former colleague from Shanghai Children's Theater, Ming, visited us. She lives in Flushing, Queens, now, and they had not seen each other for over 30 years. At the age of 70, she looked as beautiful and elegant as I remembered from before. In the small living room in Manhattan, holding a cup of coffee, we chatted about our past. When my father told my sister and me that Ming was a prodigy back then, a cute and talented pianist favored by Madam Song, the vice chairman of China in the 50s, Ming laughed loud like a young girl. "That almost got me killed during the Cultural Revolution," she said.

Detained, she was publicly condemned and beaten, her hair hacked off, and her boyfriend forced to kneel on broken glasses.

"What was the accusation?" I asked. A question that I knew was stupid but I asked it anyway.

"You got me," she smiled, showing her still cute dimples. "Being a prodigy was not allowed, I guess. That's one. They accused me of admiring the Western life style. That's another." She lifted her cup of coffee to her eyes and said, "I remember one condemnation was that I had said once that 'Coffee tastes good.'" She laughed again.

"Coffee tastes good," I repeated silently, shaking my head.

Just like Ming's unthinkable story, my own story in *Red Scarf Girl* often stirs a lot of questions.

"Why did your family have to put up with this? Why didn't your family escape?" This is one question I have been asked again and again by students

after they have read my story.

To American kids, how could anyone let her father be detained and tortured without a legitimate charge? Or let her mother be forbidden to take sick leave even when she passed out? Or let her 74-year-old grandma be forced to sweep the neighborhood alley twice a day for over one year because she was the widow of a landowner? Or let a bunch of strangers search her home, force her grandma to kneel on a sharp-edged washboard, and take away their table, chairs, even beds, without a warrant?

Of course not. American kids would scream, kick, or even, think, as one boy wrote to me, "If I were you, I would have shot them with a gun."

I knew my story was foreign to them, even before I started to write it.

So, I showed them, picture by picture, story after story of how we lived in the darkness.

We had to register in our neighborhood and get ration stamps for everything—rice, cooking oil, sugar, beef, or

fabric. Without registration—no ration stamps. Therefore, no survival. The government controlled our registration, and no one was allowed to move around freely. My colleague married someone who lived outside of our city, Shanghai. He waited for 15 years before his wife was allowed to move to Shanghai and get ration stamps.

Even just to travel temporarily, permission was required. No permission meant no train ticket or long distance bus ticket. "Could you ride a bike for three days to a remote village?" kids asked. "Yes, you could. But you would be sent back if you couldn't show your permission for traveling," I answered.

The whole of China was like a gigantic net which nailed us down.

I told them another story that I heard from my father after *Red Scarf Girl* was published.

When my father was detained, day after day, at the children's theater where he worked as an actor, he was pressed to confess. He decided to write a letter to the higher authorities to defend his innocence. But then he got scared. If the letter was found by the Revolution Committee at the children's theater, he could be severely punished. In those days, this could mean torture to death. So he threw the letter into the toilet and flushed it down instead of sending it out.

But as a detainee, he was not allowed to close the bathroom door at the theater. A colleague passing by saw my



Ji-li Jiang visits students at a middle school in Tomlinson, Connecticut in 2005.

father destroy the letter, and he told on him. Then my father was dragged to the back yard of the theater, where he was forced to move the huge metal lid of the sewer pipe, and dig the sewer out scoop by scoop to find the scraps of his letter as a punishment.

A gigantic net! We had no way to escape. We had no place to escape.

It's hard enough for students to imagine the physical description in my book—how the Red Guards cut people's trouser legs or leather shoes, if the style looked Western; how teachers and principals were forced to kneel down on the ground and had ink poured on their faces in front of their students.... But it's even harder for them to comprehend why the whole country—1.2 billion people—would so blindly follow our leader Chairman Mao and act crazily.

"We were brainwashed," I said.

"How?" they wanted to know.

Again, I showed them—picture by picture, story after story—how.

From the day I was born, Mao's portrait was hanging in the hospital hall. When I could understand words, I only heard praises about him—what a brilliant world revolutionary leader he was; how his six family members died

for the revolution (which was not accurate at all). When we started to talk, we were taught song after song about him. "Heaven and earth are great, but greater still is the Chinese Communist Party; Father and mother are dear, but dearer still is Chairman Mao."

During the Cultural Revolution, he was worshiped like a god. His name was mentioned in every song, and his pictures were displayed everywhere. Everyone wore his buttons. His collection of quotations became the only book that we studied every day. The first thing everyone did in the morning was to face his picture, wave the collection of his quotations and chant devoutly. "We wholeheartedly wish our great leader, great teacher, great commander, great helmsman, Chairman Mao long life! Long life! Long life!" Even during the most violent and turbulent time when so many deaths occurred, the government told us that Mao had given

the right instructions, and it was the people who carried out his policy who had made mistakes.

There were no foreign newspapers, and it was a crime to listen to foreign radios. We had no other information but propaganda. How would we think differently?

This was the meaning of brainwashing.

Rong Guo-tuan, the first Chinese to win a world ping-pong championship for China, committed suicide when he couldn't stand relentless torture and humiliation. In his last letter, he ended, "Please allow me to shout one more time, Long Live the Chinese Communist Party! Long Live Chairman Mao!"

This was the meaning of brainwashing. It disabled us and forbade us to think on our own. We became robots, and could only follow orders.

Often, my story has moved kids to tears. Big boys or shy girls would come to me, giving me hugs. "I am so sorry you had to go through this, but we are happy you are here now," they said.

I am glad they got the story, but I want my readers to go beyond that.

The Cultural Revolution was not the first event of its kind, and it won't be the last. If we look back at history, we see the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were killed; we see Cambodia, where four million people died under Pol Pot's regime; we see the Rwanda genocide, which killed 800,000 people, about 20 percent of the country, within 100 days in 1994; we see Darfur, where 250,000 people were killed so far, and it's still going on.

"Why did we human beings allow these tragedies to happen over and over and over again?" I asked them. "What was the most dangerous element that cultivated these tragedies in human history?"

In this article, Ji-li Jiang reflects on her visits to American schools to talk about the experiences she describes in *Red Scarf Girl*. She has developed a 38-minute DVD/video about her experiences in the Cultural Revolution. It includes photos, film footage, and personal narratives and is suitable for school use. For information about obtaining Ji-li's DVD/video (price: \$100), books, and other educational services, see her website, www.jilijiang.com

The answer is: the concentration of power.

When power was controlled by one person, or a few people, or an elite group, this kind of tragedy could happen. It could happen at any time. It could happen at any place—including our own country.

That is the lesson I want my young readers to learn. I want them to remember that, when they grow up and have the right to vote, it's their job to make sure that power won't be concentrated, and that their leaders won't abuse the power given to them.

When I first came to America 20 some years ago, I was very impressed by the beautiful and affluent lifestyle that most American children seemed to experience: huge houses, nice cars, tons of toys and countless books. There are even school buses to pick them up every day. I thought that if I shared my story



Ji-li (right) with her mother and siblings.

with them, they might appreciate their lives a little more. That was my initial intention. But after being in the United States all these years, I began to realize that this was not the whole picture.

American kids also have their own set of difficulties and challenges.

One January, I visited a school in an affluent neighborhood in the Bay Area where you would assume the kids all live happily. At lunch break, their counselor told me that in that week, eight girls had cut their wrists. One girl's parents decided to divorce during the holiday; another girl didn't see her divorced father....

In this country, it's not a novelty to be raised by a single parent, or dysfunctional parents, or to live in foster homes. On top of that, kids have to face peer pressures at schools, including bullying, drugs, sex, violence, or even school shootings, which I had never even heard of when I was a little girl in China. I realized that whether it was little Ji-li in China in the 1960s, or whether it is "Michelle" or "Alex" in America today, we do have something in common. In life we all have to deal with some challenges, face up to some unfair pressures, and make some tough decisions. That's why I keep telling my stories. I hope our children will be able to find their courage instead of yielding to pressure; that they will be able to use their minds and follow their hearts. When the time comes, they will stand up for themselves and make the right decisions. 📖



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Ji-li Jiang is an author living in San Francisco, whose publications include the *Notable Trade Book*, *Red Scarf Girl*, which has been widely used in schools. *Facing History and Ourselves*, an organization known for its commitment to combating intolerance and promoting democracy through education, has published a *Teachers' Guide* to the book. She is also the author of a storybook for children, *The Magical Monkey King*. Ji-li has visited hundreds of schools in the United States to describe her experiences in the *Cultural Revolution*, and has addressed more than 150,000 students. Readers can visit her website, www.jilijiang.com, or contact her at info@jilijiang.com