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The Top Five Narratives for Teaching about China's Cultural Revolution

Lindsey Cafarella and Chara Haeussler Bohan

Teaching about China can often be difficult because Chinese culture is very different from the culture of most American students. Students in social studies classes can find it hard to relate to such a distant and unfamiliar country. As China becomes a more and more integral part of the social studies curriculum, teachers must find effective methods to teach about the country in ways that are interesting, relevant, and engaging.

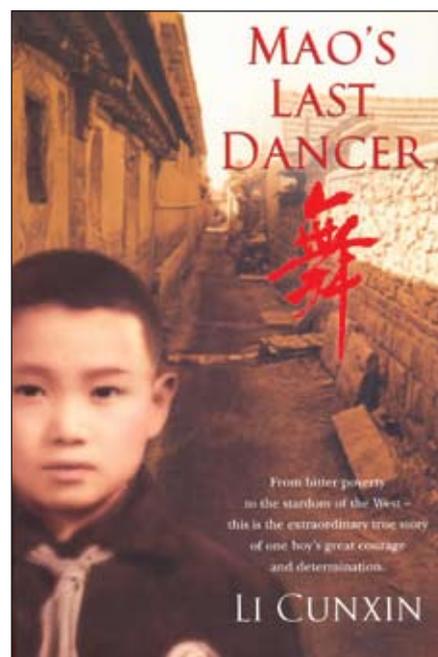
The use of the right literature can go a long way toward helping students to understand China in greater depth. A good book can immerse students in a new country and provide details about what life there is like. Students can build empathy and understanding for Chinese people and culture as they relate to characters in books about China. Finally, it is important for our students to read literature that will help them build literacy skills specific to social studies.¹ Considerable amounts of research on literacy in social studies point to the importance of establishing a narrative as a framework to help students better understand historical events.² A memoir grounded in history helps students build social studies skills such as cause and effect, chronological order, and understanding multiple points of view.³

Each year, NCSS produces the list of *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People*. This list has often included books about China during the rule of Mao Zedong. Mao came to power after World War II. After defeating Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist government in a civil war, he set out to reform China

through an agrarian form of communism. Mao's original intents and purposes appeared noble, but he quickly descended into megalomania, and the people suffered under his totalitarian grip.

From 1966 until his death in 1976, Mao Zedong used the Cultural Revolution as a way to solidify his hold on China and reduce any threat to his power. During the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals were persecuted. Many members of the Communist Party were accused of being bourgeois, and people engaged in witch-hunts to find those with "black status" or wealthy class backgrounds. Any person who came from a landlord family, even tenuously, or who dared speak out against the methods of the Cultural Revolution was persecuted. Red Guards, comprised of many young people, roamed cities smashing signs deemed unrevolutionary. The Red Guards forced people, including the elderly, to kneel in glass for class crimes. Enemies of the Cultural Revolution were forced to march with half-shaved heads in the Revolutionary parade down city streets as a form of humiliation and

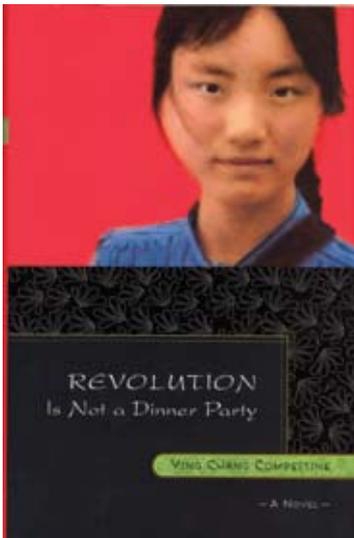
punishment. The Cultural Revolution and the rule of Chairman Mao was an extremely dramatic and trying time for the Chinese. Thus, it is an important era for students to study (as well as a topic that makes for riveting literature). From past NCSS *Notable Social Studies Trade Books* lists we have compiled a list of five stories that would be appropriate and effective texts for teaching middle and high school students about the rule of Mao Zedong.



Mao's Last Dancer

The first book, *Mao's Last Dancer*, is the story of internationally renowned ballet dancer Li Cunxin.⁴ Born in 1961, he was selected by delegates of Madame

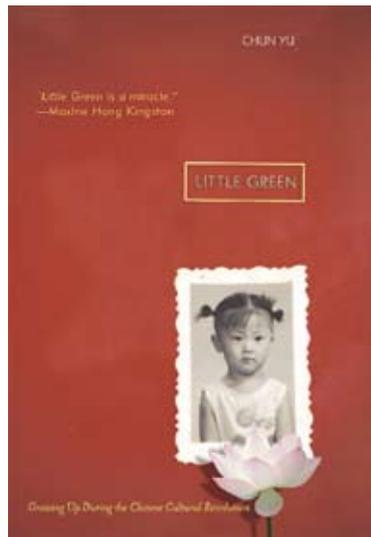
Mao to leave his small town to become a dancer. Madame Mao coordinated the media and arts during the Cultural Revolution. In 1979, Cunxin was selected to train in Houston, and he later defected from China to live in the United States. He describes life in China before and during the Cultural Revolution, and analyzes relations between China and the United States. Because the book is well written and relatable, its appeal is not limited to students who like dance. To help explain the historical aspects of China that do not translate well, Cunxin includes a brief history and a timeline in the back. Cunxin's story is also available as a picture book for younger readers called *Dancing to Freedom: The True Story of Mao's Last Dancer*.⁵



Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party

A different perspective on growing up during the Cultural Revolution is Ying Chang Compestine's *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party*.⁶ Compestine does not write specifically about her own experiences, but her childhood in China strongly impacts the story. The main character, Ling, was born to a wealthy family with two doctors as parents, which made them a target for persecution during the Cultural Revolution. A member of the Communist Party moved into their home, and her father was jailed until the death of Chairman Mao in 1976.

Compestine includes a historical background section at the end, but her story is told in a strong voice that lends itself to historical empathy.⁷ Ling's rebellious spirit in the face of hardships makes her a dynamic character with whom students easily identify.

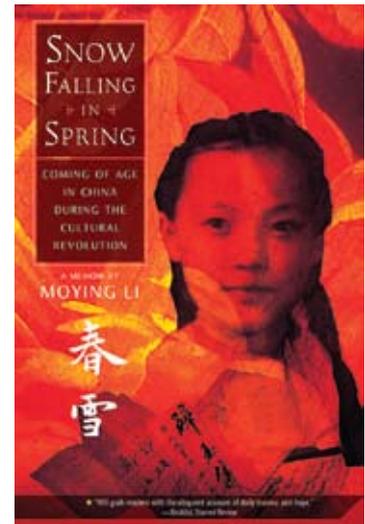


Little Green: Growing Up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution

A younger perspective on the Cultural Revolution comes from Chun Yu and her memoir *Little Green*.⁸ Born in 1966, Yu describes her childhood using poetry, which makes the reading interesting and easily used in small segments as well as in the entirety. She was only 10 years old when Chairman Mao died, so Yu can truly offer a child's perspective on the Cultural Revolution. While other memoirs detail the struggle to make sense of the surrounding insanity, Yu was so young that she can truly only detail her bewilderment. As a result, this book is better suited to middle school students than high school students.

Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution

Snow Falling in Spring by Moying Li is another memoir of adolescence in the People's Republic of China.⁹ Li, an avid student at a prestigious language school in Beijing, was primed for a bright future. Aged twelve at the beginning of



the Cultural Revolution, she watches her teachers being beaten in public, and she flees from Beijing to return to her hometown. Unfortunately, she finds her home ransacked and her father taken away, along with his book collection. Li struggles to make sense of the cruelty surrounding her. She reads voraciously despite the de-emphasis placed on education at the time. The drama of the story makes for an engaging narrative while providing a strong background in the history of the Cultural Revolution.

Red Scarf Girl

One book similar to Moying Li's that has been used frequently in middle school classrooms is Ji-li Jiang's *Red Scarf Girl*, a Notable Trade Book in 1998.¹⁰ *Red Scarf Girl* is a memoir detailing Jiang's experiences as a young teenager during the Cultural Revolution. This primary source reveals the details of daily hardship and the challenge of placing blame on Mao in a society dominated by a Cult of Personality. Jiang struggles with discrimination against her family for their affluent past and against herself for being a good student. Like Jiang, many Chinese citizens had a family member affected by the Cultural Revolution, and many faced tough choices between their family and the Communist Party they believed brought stability to China. Jiang's story is relatable, honest, and easy to read. Although she is faced with decisions and events very

LESSON PLAN DERIVED FROM *RED SCARF GIRL*

Activity 1

Books are an effective way to develop students' knowledge and understanding of unfamiliar places, but as social studies teachers, we must also take care to help students develop important themes present in these books. To that end, we have developed a lesson around a particular chapter of Ji-li Jiang's *Red Scarf Girl* that addresses the NCSS social studies curriculum standards themes pertaining to culture as well as people, places and environment. In this section of *Red Scarf Girl*, Jiang describes the making of *da-zi-bao*. *Da-zi-bao* were propaganda tools, often in the form of posters, created by Chinese students to denounce members of the community, particularly teachers or students who were viewed as not committed to the Cultural Revolution. Before students read the chapter, the teacher should prompt them to consider how schools might be different if the students were in charge. After a brief classroom discussion, students read pages 38–51 in *Red Scarf Girl*, which describes Jiang's experiences as a student when *da-zi-bao* were made in her school about people whom she loved and respected. Eventually, one *da-zi-bao* was made about her for being a good student. Readers might empathize with her profound sense of shame.

One important aspect of reading with students is to ensure that they understand the purpose.¹¹ The teacher should offer students guidelines for reading beforehand, which can include all or some of the following questions: What were *da-zi-bao*, and why were they used? Why would Chairman Mao use students as a key element of the Cultural Revolution? For what reason would a *da-zi-bao* be written? Why were they written about Ji-li? What consequences would confront someone whose name appeared in a *da-zi-bao*? What was the cause of the Cultural Revolution? What effects may result from the Cultural Revolution? The teacher must make sure the students understand the reading by discussing these questions after students have read the passages.

Once students have demonstrated that they understand the material, they engage in making their own *da-zi-bao*. Students should target an element of culture, society, or schooling rather than targeting specific people. The teacher should take care to mention that *da-zi-bao* should not be written about other students or teachers at their actual school, as it would not be prudent to hurt somebody's feelings. Students have two options: they can make fictional or non-fictional *da-zi-bao*. The students can invent *da-zi-bao* by using pseudonyms, as most of the *da-zi-bao* made during the Cultural Revolution were, at best, extensions of the truth. Types of *da-zi-bao* created could range from popular culture and fashion to school issues such as standardized testing or rules within the school. For example, students can make a *da-zi-bao* about fictional characters such as Harry Potter, Sponge Bob, and Edward Cullen or real historic characters drawn from U.S. or world history.

After completing their posters, students should try to judge which posters are fictional and which are not. The discussion should lend itself to the following questions: What problems arise from creating fictional *da-zi-bao*? Is it always easy to tell which *da-zi-bao* are fictional? Why would somebody choose to follow

this propaganda? What problems could arise as a result of students only learning the ideas of Chairman Mao?

To assess this activity, students and teachers have a variety of options. Students can write a narrative from an account of someone affected by propaganda, whether it be somebody like Ji-li Jiang or somebody who has been brainwashed by propaganda. Students might try to find an example of propaganda elsewhere in the world, from either current events or from history. Students could also research the impact of youth in other revolutions, which lends itself well to discussions of the modern revolutions in the Middle East.

Activity 2

As we struggled to finish our world history curriculum and prepare our students for standardized tests, the Middle East began to change in fundamental ways. As the winds of change swept through Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, we struggled to find a way to have these changes resonate with our students. Our answer came in an unlikely place: the study of China and the Cultural Revolution. Maoist China was able to do what the Egyptian and Tunisian governments could not—successfully control the media. The Chinese government in the late 1960s and 1970s censored movies and controlled the written press and television, as the country lacked a television infrastructure. This media control presented an opportunity to highlight the importance of freedom of the press in securing individual rights and fair government—whether it be China, Tunisia, or the United States. Reading *Red Scarf Girl* with a social studies class presents students with a potent framework to analyze the power of media.

To help students understand the importance of media control, we provide students with a government-sanctioned version of the events of the Cultural Revolution. Propaganda posters of the time are readily available, but work best when used with official editorials from that time. We located an editorial from a 1967 edition of the *Peking Review*, an English language Chinese newspaper.¹² The *Peking Review* published the writings of important Communist Party leaders in China during the Cultural Revolution. This editorial explained that:

In such a very complicated and acute class struggle, how are we to draw a clear-cut line between the enemy and ourselves and maintain a firm stand? How are we to distinguish between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, genuine revolutionaries and sham revolutionaries...? We must master Mao Tse-tung's thought, the powerful ideological weapon, and use it as a telescope and a microscope to observe all matters.

Students should read the editorial with teacher guidance, then compare this account to *Red Scarf Girl*. The comparison can be done through primary source charts, compare-and-contrast essay prompts, or a group reading of primary source documents.

different from the experiences of contemporary American teenagers, she tells her story in a way with which American social studies students can identify, as many of the problems of adolescence and trying to fit in are universal.



The Macarthurschool website lists *Red Scarf Girl* at grade level 6.1 and assigns a lexile score of 780 (see Macarthurschool website at www.macarthurschool.org/stustuff/scholastic/lexiles/700_799/export.html) This article's lesson plan (see facing page) is based on the book.

Conclusion

A society without freedom of the press tends towards Orwellian totalitarianism. When students recognize how Mao used his control of the press to determine the official version of the Cultural Revolution, they may begin to question other official versions of history. And while China today has turned toward increased economic freedom, the government still places heavy control on the media.¹³ Facebook is officially forbidden, although many people access it through internet proxies. After the start of the Arab Spring, online Chinese protesters had called for a Jasmine Revolution and the government went so far as to ban internet searches for the word jasmine. The year 2011 marked the 90th anniversary of the creation of the Chinese Communist Party and although China's citizens now experience more freedoms, "power is still controlled by an elite group."¹⁴ The use of narratives about the Cultural Revolution, such as the books suggested in this article,

enhance student understanding of current events in China. These techniques improve student literacy, enhance historical empathy, and increase student understanding of this complex time period in China's history. 🌐

Notes

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12. Jiefangjun Bao, "Mao Tse-tung's Thought Is the Telescope and Microscope of Our Revolutionary Cause," *Peking Review*, no. 24 (June 10, 1966): 6-7.
13. The English version of the Chinese Communist Party paper is available online at English.peopledaily.com/cn and offers a fascinating comparison to *New York Times* articles on the same issues, particularly on controversial issues like Google's role in China and the artist Ai Wei Wei.
14. Interview with Ji-li Jiang by author, June 1, 2011.

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