Growing up in Red China: Representations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in young adult novels and memoirs

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Abstract

This manuscript made a critically incisive analysis of a unique body of adolescent literature representing coming-of-age experiences during the Cultural Revolutions by diasporic Chinese writers. It attempts to provide teachers with information of the most important young adult titles on this topic, to analytically scrutinize the texts from a critical literacy lens, and to offer concrete steps and strategies in pedagogy to include them in the curriculum as a vital resource for student development.

Introduction

Growing up in the political turbulence of the late sixties and burgeoning into maturity in the seventies and eighties, young adult (YA) literature in America has become an important vehicle for literacy instruction at secondary schools, with diverse genres, topics, and formats. However, the characters in YA literature are primarily white European American, and there is a significant lack of books that are culturally specific in their content (Bishop, 1992). Moreover, Jack Forman (1985, p. 469) lamented that, “political concerns and action have been neglected by authors of young adult novels while other subjects, once considered taboo, have been legitimated and indeed embraced by enterprising writers of stories for teens”.

However, in recent years, especially after the 9/11, more and more YA writers have realized the importance of reading political-conscious novels in improving young people’s critical thinking ability and social responsibility. And we have witnessed the publication of Sold (McCormick, 2006), Sunrise over Fallujah (Myers, 2008), and War (Junger, 2010) dealing with politics, social justice, and war, by a wide variety of authors beyond borders. For adolescents and young adults, engaging with multicultural literature has multiple benefits, such as broadening the worldview, interrupting prejudice and misunderstanding, and reflecting on self (Landt, 2006). By being immersed in different cultures and places, young readers will think beyond their known world and face the many challenges and moral dilemmas presented in these texts. As Zitlow and Stover (1998) noted, “the opportunity and ability to see how others experience life is especially important for young adults who are in the process of becoming independent participants in a world much larger than their own school and community” (Introduction section, para. 6). Thus these books are well received by teachers, parents, and students.

As an international student from Mainland China, the first thing I did after I came to the US was to delve into the corpus of children’s and young adult literature, to find out how Chinese people, history, and culture were represented and portrayed in the print literary texts in the Western world. It’s amazing to be able to see that ethnic Chinese and their indigenous culture are vividly depicted in classical folktales, historical legends, and contemporary realistic novels. From my extensive reading experiences, I discovered a unique body of adolescent literature by diasporic Chinese writers, which not only provides insights about Chinese cultural practices with authentic ethnic characters but also addresses young people’s political concerns by depicting past historical events. They fit in the growing number of titles, providing chances for sociopolitical thinking for young people. These authors write for young adult audiences in the American and other Western secondary schools, delineating their formative growing-up experiences in Mao’s authoritarian political
regime during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976. Teenage characters play a central role in these stories: they confront genuine political issues of their day in agitation and turmoil, they are persecuted but protest courageously, make personal sacrifices to protect their family members, express political viewpoints, take political actions as a form of resistance, and accept consequences of their political commitment. These texts represent an issue in complex ways that challenge systemic injustices and social inequities. Moreover, they highlight insiders’ voices and incorporate a range of perspectives (Burns, 2009; Ching, 2005; George, 2002; Short, 2009). By facing history and themselves boldly, these writers also challenge young people, Chinese and American, to reflect on this historical period and rethink about human rights problems in cross-cultural contexts from a more critical perspective.

Interestingly, there has been little explicit and critical examination of this body of literature published for today’s teens. Frontline teachers often feel baffled about how to help their students systematically approach these books from a critical lens in the language arts class and, as a result, they just shelf these books or let students read randomly without a deeper understanding of the most significant sociopolitical event in China’s contemporary history. Therefore, this paper attempts to closely scrutinize this special type of YA literature and help teachers make better use of them for literacy instructional practices to the secondary school students.

A Theoretical Framework of Critical Literacy for Activism

As McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) indicate, “critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the power relations that exist between readers and authors” (p. 14). In other words, critical literacy challenges readers to defy a simplistic and superficial understanding of a piece of text, such as setting, plot development, characters, and the other basic literary elements. Instead it encourages readers to identify the author’s purpose, underlying ideology, beliefs, values, and limitations hidden in the texts. Curricular goals cannot be limited to a focus on basic skills but rather need to provide children and youth with “the knowledge, skills, and commitment needed to act to change the world to make it more just” (Banks, 2003, p. 18). Young adult fiction can be a powerful way to teach for critical literacy (Alsup, 2003). In the process of deconstructing the complex literary texts, readers become active agents of their own reading experiences and their critical thinking habits will be nurtured. Moreover, a critical literacy approach interrogates the assumptions authors make about their readers as well as the unequal power relations embedded in the texts. Many educators advocate for teaching practices that will support students in working to challenge and change systemic problems (e.g., George, 2002; Laman, 2006; Short, 2009).

Further, reading young adult literature can be one of the most enjoyable and effective ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because we can situate this content in the appealing stories of wonderful books. Through young adult literature, students are invited and challenged to grapple with moral and ethical quandaries, uncomfortable and even painful issues, in a space where students and teachers can gather to reflect on their understandings and responses, to consider alternatives, and to collaborate in extending their worldviews (Laman, 2006; Short, 2009). Through the perspective of a text, teachers and students can relate their lives to the worlds depicted in a story and draw both inspirations as well as activist strategies from the characters’ actions (Heffernan & Lewison, 2005; Laman, 2006).

Overview of Young Adult Literature Featuring the Cultural Revolution
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Jili Jiang’s (1998) sensationally gripping autobiography *Red Scarf Girl: A memoir of the Cultural Revolution* marked the beginning. It was immediately followed by Da Chen’s (2004) *China’s Son: Growing up in the Cultural Revolution*, Guo Yue’s (2008) *Little Leap Forward: A boy in Beijing*, Tingxing Ye’s (2008) *My Name Is Number 4: A true story from the Cultural Revolution*, and more. Though not many in number, they have become one of the most important venues for the American young readers to get to know China. And these books can be used as rich resources in the language arts, social studies or world history classes. On the one hand, they revealed to the American young readers unfamiliar with Chinese history the extraordinary sociopolitical events of the Maoist period and the first-hand experiences of coming of age during the Cultural Revolution; on the other hand, these books helped them think more analytically and critically about politics, freedom, and democracy, by attempting to make as much sense as possible of an age of paranoid, injustice, and mutual betrayal in which the protagonist and his/her families were victims. Moreover, through describing sufferings, protests against persecution, confessions of complicity, sexual awakening, and search for identity in a chaotic era, these books also shed light on the importance of literature in shaping the image of China in the Western world and on the process of cross-cultural understandings using English as media. Finally, their literary merits are also highly appreciated for the usage of varied rhetorical devices and literary techniques.

In this paper, I’ll introduce the most representative and critically acclaimed young adult novels and memoirs on the Cultural Revolution by expatriate Chinese writers, who witnessed or got involved in the tumultuous historical events during their adolescence, and later immigrated to the US. I categorize these books into three groups in view of their different subject matters. The first group includes visceral pieces written from the standpoint of the victims. They integrate the authors’ personal retrospections into the dominant narrative of this historical period. Richard King (2003) effectively and succinctly summarized the plot of the first group of novels about the Cultural Revolution by stating that “typically the authors of these memoirs recall a life of relative tranquility disrupted by the Cultural Revolution; they describe Red Guard excesses and the persecution of their families followed by years of banishment from the cities to state farms and cadre schools; then they conclude with political rehabilitation and the decision to leave China, often with the help of a Western partner” (p. 281). In a word, they told us thrilling stories about sufferings, persecutions, and injustices in Maoist China from the perspective of an innocent victim. The second group incorporates pieces about the authors’ sent-down experiences in the remote countryside where they were re-educated by poor peasants and received ideological reform through hard labor. They were entangled in intricate conspiracies or were labeled as counter-revolutionaries and tortured by peers. But they also victimized others for the sake of personal safety. After immigrating to the West, these writers began to critically examine their past experiences and reflect on the significant agency a person can have even in the most unusual situations. The third group is mainly concerned with sexualizing the Cultural Revolution - how the denial of femininity and normal human desire and, furthermore, the indoctrination of political dogmas victimize the young minds and lead to the destruction of personal happiness or even loss of life. Like John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono, who stayed in bed for three days in protest against the Vietnam War, sex can be used as an act of resistance and nonconformity for a political purpose. The plots of these three groups of novels and memoirs evolve from simplicity toward complexity and, their complementary perspectives present the young readers a comprehensive view and nuanced understandings of Maoist China.

In the following sections, I’ll discuss the most representative literary pieces of each group and help teachers learn about how they can help their students read these books critically in a meaningful way.

*Voices of the Victims - A Happy Family Shattered and Immigration to the US*
Jili Jiang’s *Red Scarf Girl* is perhaps the most prominent book in the first group. It won several awards, including 1998 Notable Children’s Books and 1998 Best Books for Young Adults (ALA). In 1966 when Jili Jiang was twelve years old, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution broke out which disrupted her whole life. As an outstanding student cadre in the admiration of her peers, she had a promising future. But suddenly intelligence became a crime and a wealthy family was labeled as capitalist bloodsucker. Jili and her family were humiliated and reviled bitterly by their former friends and acquaintances. Her house was sacked and the whole family lived in constant fear of arrest and mortification. At last, with the detention of her father, Jili was faced with an agonizing choice, which landed her into a predicament: denounce him and break with her family, or refuse to testify her fathers’ counter-reactionary crimes and sacrifice her future. Her description is very vivid in portraying the ambivalence a teenage girl had to undergo in the face of such a tough choice:

> Thin-Face and the woman left, saying they would be back to get my statement. Without knowing how I got there, I found myself in a narrow passageway between the school building and the schoolyard wall. The gray concrete walls closed around me, and a slow drizzle dampened my cheeks. I could not go back to the classroom, and I could not go home. I felt like a small animal that had fallen into a trap, alone and helpless, and sure that the hunter was coming. (Jiang, 1997, pp. 226-227)

At last, Jili made a brave choice: protect her father and family rather than forsake them for her own future, for nothing is more valuable than family love. After years of perseverance, disappointments and struggles, Jili’s father was finally rehabilitated (regained his former position and got the lost property confiscated by the Red Guards) and appointed Vice President of the Children’s Art Theatre. At the same time, Jili made the decision to immigrate to America. She is now running a company promoting cross-cultural exchanges between China and the US.

Told with simplicity, innocence and grace, this unforgettable memoir not only recounts the most significant political movement in the 20th century China, but also depicts the indomitable courage of a little girl as she struggles between her belief in Chairman Mao, the Communist Party, and her loyalty to family. It tells the American young readers what it feels like growing up during the Cultural Revolution, encouraging them to reflect on their own life, freedom, human rights, and democracy in relation to the situations in the other countries.

Except for Jiang’s book, several other books also share the same storyline - happy family, victimization, struggle, rehabilitation, immigration, and thankfulness to the newly adopted country for freedom. Among them, the most prominent one published recently is Compestine’s *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party*, winner of the 2008 ALA Best Book for Young Adult Award. Described as the “Annie Frank in the Cultural Revolution,” Compestine’s fictionalized memoir delineates her experiences of coming of age and fighting to survive during the darkest period in contemporary Chinese history. Her work brims with hope, humor, optimism, and a yearning for freedom.

This story, based on Compestine’s childhood in Wuhan, China during the 1960s and 70s, follows the similar storyline of *Red Scarf Girl* by portraying her family and herself as innocent and wronged victims. However, despite its powerful language, moving plot and vivid portrayal, the major historical events depicted in the novel seem far-fetched and distorted. The movement of one of Mao’s political officials into her apartment caused gradual disintegration of her world and the Red Guards raided her house in the early 1970s. In fact, surveillance of people’s privacy and house ransacking happened right after the beginning the Cultural Revolution and ended in 1969 when the Red Guards were sent down to the countryside for reeducation in order to maintain national order and integrity. Hence Compestine made an anachronistic error, rendering her depiction and narrative flimsy and
unreal. Moreover, the use of language is not as syntactically complicated as Jiang’s, thus greatly impairing the expressive effects of her work.

Similar storylines also can be found in some other books for young readers. Though none of them won the ALA award and probably are not as prominent as the fore-mentioned two stories, still they have their own distinct regional and personal flavors. For instance, Da Chen’s (2004) *China’s Son: Growing Up in the Cultural Revolution* offers us an account of how a model student persecuted in the Cultural Revolution turned into a gangster and later worked hard to be enrolled into a prestigious university. Chun Yu’s (2005) *Little Green: Growing Up During the Chinese Cultural Revolution* is an emotional memoir written in refreshing poetic verses complementing and expanding the more substantive narratives in novels, Moying Li’s (2008) *Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution* presents an inspiring memoir accounting the author’s childhood in the dark period when she clung to family and tradition, and Guo Yue and Clare Farrow’s (2008) *Little Leap Forward: A Boy in Beijing* tells us a young boy’s experience of coming of age during the Cultural Revolution, with breath-taking and stunningly beautiful illustrations.

Teachers can help students read these stories critically and reflect on the human rights situations in America and the other countries. After the Cultural Revolution, people woke up and found they were deceived. The purpose of the movement was not to eliminate capitalism and revisionism, and bring about transformations, but instead an attempt by Mao to gain the upper hand in factional struggle to retain his power. People slandered good teachers, told on their neighbors, ransacked others’ houses, and betrayed their parents with malevolent lies to protect their future because they were manipulated by the Communist Party and lost their thinking ability. They were all brainwashed.

However, teachers need to be aware that though the courage and fortitude these authors exhibited in surviving enormous physical torments and emotional traumas are commendable, these coming-of-age stories set in the Cultural Revolution are, to some extent, very unsatisfactory due to their superficial thematic significance, lack of more critical perspectives, and a sublime moral tone. They try to portray their and their family members’ moral superiority to the other Chinese who betrayed conscience and tortured others for personal advancement or political security. Such is the tone in Compestine’s *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party* and Jili Jiang’s *Red Scarf Girl*. Actually, in this group of novels, almost all writers are reticent about their and their family members’ possible personal complicity in the political upheavals. Whereas, the fact is that few people were innocent. To survive in the political turmoil, the persecuted often had to persecute the others, even for self-protection. Positioning themselves as innocent victims, the authors exonerate themselves from any responsibility for the horrors and ignore the agency people can still possibly have even under unbearable circumstances. For older readers beyond the age of 12-14, a more critical perspective needs to be provided by engaging them in a more complicated narrative about the complexity of humanity.

*Depicting the Complexity of Humanity: A Sent-Down Girl’s Reflections on Her Experiences on a Prison Farm*

If Jili Jiang and the other YA writers present us a gloomy picture of what an innocent child endured and suffered in the Cultural Revolution at the mercy of the totalitarian Chinese regime, Tingxing Ye’s (2010) book *My Name Is Number 4* is an exception to the exclusive focus on the theme of victimization common in most of the young adult novels about the Cultural Revolution, and it is the only book about Chinese teenagers’ sent-down experiences in YA literature. Teachers will find this book useful as it provides students with a personal perspective from someone who has lived through the Cultural Revolution as an educated youngster in the countryside.
Tingxing Ye, born in 1952, is a Chinese-Canadian author of young adult novels. She is also the author of *A Leaf in The Bitter Wind* (1998), a best-selling autobiography of her life in Maoist China. *My Name Is Number 4* is an abridged version of her autobiography based on her true life stories, and is adapted for young adult readers.

While Ye did portray her family members and herself as victims because they were labeled as the “seven black categories” (landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, evildoers, rightists, capitalists, and reactionary intellectuals) and were persecuted brutally, she incriminates herself and thus proclaims that she did something for which she held herself responsible and guilty. Ye grew up witnessing the plight of many people caught in the abyss of the political movement, including her parents whose untimely death orphaned their five children. In the late 1960s, Mao launched the Shangshan Xiaxiang (up to the mountains and down the villages) movement. It is one of the key strategies that Mao Zedong and his radical colleagues carried out to restructure the Chinese society by mingling the educated youths with the laboring masses. The cover of the book foregrounding a pretty girl’s innocent face, with her iron fist rising aloft against the background of millions of slogan-chanting young people with peasants, showed a life-like picture of the nationwide sent-down campaign. Actually, it was part of a national government policy, ostensibly designed to alleviate pressure on urban populations. At sixteen, like millions of other Chinese young men and women, Ye was exiled to a prison farm to reform her worldview by going to work in the “vast universe of the countryside.” Over 16 million urban youths had been sent to the countryside, forming the largest migration in human history. Ye was doomed to senseless sacrifice and abandonment. While on the farm, Ye was tormented at the hands of her leaders by harsh labor, humiliation, and ostracism. Finally she betrayed her close friends for personal well-being by signing a false statement accusing them of counter-revolutionary activities. She expressed her heart-felt repentance in her autobiography:

To my lasting shame, I filled two pages with untruths and exaggerations….I said that my friends and I had held meetings criticizing the PLA, which was false. My pages were sent back and forth to Cui and Zhao that night. They crossed things out, wrote comments in the margin, and I would rewrite the confession according to their ‘suggestions’….Even today I have never forgiven myself for informing on the only four people on the farm who treated me as a friend…. (Ye, 2010, p. 188)

Though it was done under the duress of physical torture, mental confusion, and sleep deprivation, she acknowledged her guilt and accepted personal responsibility. She uses her personal narrative as a way of engaging in a project of recovering from trauma, reconciling herself with her personal past and with history, and empowering herself as an active agent in her newly adopted Western country.

Sometimes even family members had to make such a thorny choice and betray each other for personal benefits. To save herself from the cancellation of urban residential status and the prospect of becoming a permanent peasant in the remote countryside, Ye’s sister had to sacrifice her sibling’s future by remaining silent and procrastinating her decision to become an educated intellectual in response to Mao’s call—every household has to send a teenager to live and work in the poverty-stricken rural area, and that person will lose his or her residential status in the urban city forever. Ye’s fate hung in suspense as she anxiously waited for the government’s final decision about who would become the rusticated “educated youth.” Her feelings are incredibly multi-dimensional as she is torn by a multitude of hopes, fears, desires, and expectations.

How easily a person can become inhumane and disclose indignity by resting his or her personal safety on the misfortunes of others, regardless of how little agency one has under pressure. Ye’s denunciation of her friends, and her sister’s selfish act are deemed as unforgivable because people still have the freedom to stand firm when brutalized as well as the agency not to harm the others for the sake of personal security. Ye’s friends left the prison farm without bidding farewell after being “cleared” and cut all connections with her
thereafter. And even today, Ye’s sister still can’t face her sibling and has a disturbed conscience for her past inexcusable act. She would bear the heavy burden of guilt for the rest of her life, even after Ye was enrolled in Peking University and immigrated to Canada later.

As the only YA book depicting the “sent-down” experiences of urban intellectual youths, the thematic significance of My Name Is Number 4 is that it transcends beyond the mere report of victimization toward self-incriminating confessions of cruel disloyalty in attaining agency in the West. Further, it depicts the complexity of humanity—every victim, under menace, might be another ulterior victimizer for the sake of his or her own personal security. The American young readers can relate this story to the ones they read about the World War II where people told on the innocent Jews or revealed their hiding places for monetary gains or simply ethnic hatred.

Sexualizing the Cultural Revolution and Resistance through Nonconformity: Deconstructing the Cultural Revolution through the Feminist Perspective

Unlike the above-mentioned autobiographic books narrating personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution from an innocent victim’s perspective or confessing one’s complicity and expressing repentance, Anchee Min’s (2002) Wild Ginger approaches the Cultural Revolution from an alternative perspective by fictionalizing a teenage love story. Though it is not strictly labeled as a young adult novel, this book might be suitable for the older and more mature teenage readers, due to its more complicated plot, critical perspective, and some implicitly erotic depictions. It chronicles two girls maturing and blossoming in Shanghai during the late 1960s and 1970s when Chairman Mao ruled the country with an iron fist, and different factions of the Red Guards took up arms in his name. Though it was published primarily for the adult readers, since all the characters in this book are impressionable teenagers and the author adopts the tone of a middle-school adolescent as the protagonist, this book still has great appeal and relevance to the young adult readers.

What is striking about this book at the first sight is its unique cover, featuring a girl draped in the bloody Communist national flag and covered with Mao buttons. It is a story about love, sex, betrayal, fanaticism, self-sacrifice, and friendship.

In Mao’s period, the concept of revolution was not only related to violence but also to masculinity as opposed to femininity. Domesticity and tranquility are viewed as feminine; violence and involvement with the outer world are regarded as masculine. There was little distinction between men and women’s clothing. Everyone wore blue or green suit. Women had a plain, shortcut hairstyle, just a little longer than men’s. Some female students even had baldheads and imitated men’s gestures to show their “revolutionary” spirit. Romantic love and sexuality, which were considered bourgeois, became a taboo in such a “revolutionary” atmosphere. The perpetual theme of love in any artistic form was criticized, because one should have only proletarian class affection and revolutionary relationships.

This story happened among three teenagers. The beautiful, self-possessed, and defiant girl Wild Ginger was singled out for jeering and bullying by the sadist Red Guards even in the elementary school, just because of the foreign-color of her eyes and usually light skin—her father was half-French. Her good friend Maple was also the target for persecution for her father’s minor infraction. The two girls became best friends over their shared ostracism and engaged in acts of bravery in the morass. Wild Ginger was indoctrinated to believe in the Communist revolutionary cause and had soaring inspirations to become fervent Maoist protégé. She finally became a devout Maoist, immersed in Mao’s dogmas like an ascetic nun, with a vow of celibacy. But at the same time, she fell in love with Evergreen, Maple’s neighbor, which put her in an untenable position and ultimately mortal danger. Men and women got married only for pure camaraderie in order to advance proletarian revolutionary
cause and build socialism. The fate of the three is intricately intertwined, with Evergreen falling in love with Maple and Wild Ginger committing suicide in desperation.

This powerful narrative acutely inquires into the fragile sensitivities, wounded psyches, eroticism, and emotions of an entire generation of Chinese youth, and brilliantly delineates sexual and psychological distortions of that frenzied times. If Tingxing Ye attempts to establish significant agency by incriminating herself and confessing ignominious acts of betrayal and cruel disloyalty, Anchee Min’s exploration is bolder in affirming the possibility of personal agency, even in the most coercively extraordinary situations. When everyone was frantically reciting Mao’s Little Red Book and got brainwashed by the extreme doctrines, Maple remained levelheaded all the time by acts of nonconformity, such as refusing to participate in the contest of reciting Mao’s quotations and helping to protect the persecuted victims. In the era when premarital sex is strictly forbidden and bodily desire is deemed as a sin, Maple vents her sexual frustrations by seeking secret bodily pleasures with Evergreen in a pitch-dark wardrobe while Wild Ginger fell in a dead sleep practicing for Mao’s quotation recitation competition. Maple enjoyed Evergreen shamelessly and she even felt lucky for what had happened because they had offered each other something they craved—human affection. Evergreen exclaimed, “Let’s be the reactionaries, let’s burn down the house of Mao” (Min, 2002, p. 149).

What a political blasphemy on the prevalent Chinese official discourse on women’s equality with men—“Women hold up half of the sky,” as the cliché goes. The primary way to deny femininity was to degender women by outlawing sexual desire. “While women’s bodies are supposed to function only as workers to advance China’s position, Min links her individual body to the social body and asserts that women’s bodies have desire that cannot be contained through recourse to official ideology” (Somerson, 1997, p. 107). Wild Ginger treated her bodily desire as an evil monster and banged her head against the wall so that she could “whip the beast out of her body” (Min, 2002, p. 154). Even in bed with Evergreen she wouldn’t stop reciting Mao’s quotations, “Prove that you are not a coward, admit that you are evil seduced. Show your shame, take out your sun instrument and look at it, spit on it…” (Min, 2002, p. 154). She even held up a mirror and required Evergreen to look at their bodies—the genitals are the most ugly and most disgusting organs.

In the Cultural Revolution when the tentacles of suffocating ideological control and politicization minimize family life and eliminate private space, leaving little of people’s lives untouched, the main vehicle to possibly exercise one’s agency was in the body and through one’s sexuality. Sex can be an act of exercising agency and political empowerment. By inserting desire into the movement, Min reclaims agency for women by shattering official discourse.

Pedagogical Implications for Classroom Instruction

This paper investigated three different groups of young adult novels representing the Chinese Cultural Revolution. They offer fascinating stories of ascending levels of sophistication to the American young readers of different developmental stages. From different perspectives, all of them try to depict the damage that such a revolution can do to the spiritual and moral basis of human nature, and to measure the abysmal depth into which human creatures might fall, once not restrained or protected by a sound legal system and democratic institutions. These books provide for students good food-for-thought and greater access to diverse and multilayered perspectives. Moreover, through an entertaining literary journey, young readers are also encouraged to think more critically and in a more complex way about human agency in the political context, with more opportunity to personally connect to characters, their situation, or struggle (Burns, 2009; George, 2002; Short, 2009; Wolk, 2004). By engaging with these complicated texts and sharing their interpretations, student epistemic horizons are enlarged and their understandings about
complex sociopolitical issues develop. Equally important, new questions are raised, inspiring continued inquiries and reflections (Laman, 2006).

Jili Jiang lamented in the epilogue of *Red Scarf Girl* that “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” (Jiang, 1997, p. 266). But the truth is far more complicated and this proclamation is, to some extent, a distortion of historical reality. Mao did play a key role in initiating the Cultural Revolution. But if there were no people’s response to Mao’s call, the Cultural Revolution would not have occurred at all. The key question is: Why did people respond so enthusiastically to Mao’s call? Actually, the ordinary Chinese were not passive objects simply manipulated by Mao, but active agents/participants who transformed their environments in the process. During that unusual period, people’s character and morals were seriously tested. While some people threw themselves into the movement for a noble cause or for their legitimate rights/interests; others betrayed their friends and family members for the sake of personal safety or persecuted honest people out of personal revenge or in hope of promotion. Human beings’ weaknesses, grudges, cowardice, selfishness, vanity, as well as goodness, bravery, honesty, sincerity, were all mobilized and became horrible impetuses. The reason for this unprecedented political movement is far more than the paranoia of Maoists, the tyranny of Chinese autocratic communist regime, the lack of a valid legal system, or the inhumanity of a feudalistic backward civilization, without Western democracy and liberalism. It is incumbent on teachers to present a more comprehensive, nuanced, and balanced picture to students about this historical event, and help students examine human nature more critically in a complicated way.

Teachers, while guiding young readers to explore these thrilling coming-of-age stories in China, still need to exercise caution and help students examine, assess these memoirs and novels from a critical perspective.

Firstly, due to the strict censorship of government regulations over publications about the Cultural Revolution, none of these books can be published in China’s Mainland. Thus they serve as a defiant undertaking to probe into a suppressed subject matter, offering a commendable and unforgettable representation of victimhood under a regime that has always purported to be the savior of the Chinese people. Whereas, due to these writers’ position as a diasporic group (they have since become US or Canadian citizens), on the one hand, they can assault the ideological institutions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in ways that Chinese intellectuals at home cannot; on the other hand, however, such a position also imposes limitations. Among them a significant one is the choice of audience at the cost of analytical depth in representing the Chinese history. In other words, these authors wrote their stories mostly for the young Western audience. In order to render a Chinese story of complex historical backgrounds compelling for such an audience, they have to utilize a narrative paradigm that is familiar and appealing to the Western young readers, for example, simplifying the historical background and providing a black-and-white picture. Before instruction, teachers need to give students more detailed information and background knowledge for a better understanding of that historical period, and challenge them with some thought-provoking questions. For instance, what’s the purpose of the author writing such a novel? What is his/her assumed audience? Why did so many people echo the government’s call and plunge into the campaign impetuously? What would you do if you and your family members were persecuted by the government simply because you are wealthy and have high social status? What would you do if your safety was threatened and the only way to protect yourself is by victimizing the other people? Can you relate it to the other historical events?

Secondly, all these stories expressed the authors’ disillusionment over the Cultural Revolution and, more importantly, the Communist ideals in general. This disillusionment
towards Communism made the memoirists question the deprivation of freedom, liberty, and human rights in Maoist China. But they used an exclusive Westernized gaze - a prism of democracy and modernization, to examine China, by employing Western values to reflect on their childhood or adolescence. These stories denouncing China as a Communist dictatorship and slaughterhouse on earth reinforce the American young readers' belief in their long cherished universal values. But they can also evoke relief and complacency on the part of the audience and arouse feelings of abomination and rejection towards conceivably opposite ways of life and governing system. Students need a more balanced and comprehensive picture, analytically and critically in-depth. Teachers should heighten students' consciousness of the author's target audience while writing these books and of the limitations writing interculturally.

Thirdly, without exception, all the authors performed the role of native informants and the narratives culminate in their escape from China to the West, from political oppression to the ultimate freedom. Jiang expressed her relief and thankfulness for the long-cherished freedom eventually found in America. Likewise, in Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party, Compestine's family hid a gold-framed picture of the Golden Gate Bridge - a gift from a visiting San Francisco doctor who had taught her father in medical school, behind a photo of Chairman Mao, to conceal it during ransack of their apartment by marauding Red Guards. This photo has become a beacon of hope and freedom, an icon of resistance, which fueled Ling's dream to go to America one day. Tingxing Ye and Anchee Min also expressed their gratitude for the newly found freedom in their books or interviews. By focusing exclusively on Maoist China in the past, they lose their agency by not casting an analytically critical gaze upon the oppressive power hierarchy and social injustice pervasive in the West. By serving as a witness and providing a personal testimony to the inherent "evils" in contemporary China, these writers are welcomed as guests in the West because they don't critically examine the oppressive and hegemonic nature of the new world order. Homi Bhabha (2004) has characterized it as the life of the post-colonial Diaspora.

Actually, serious human rights problems also exist in contemporary American society, especially after the 9/11, such as racial discrimination toward the Muslims, surveillance of people’s private phone conversations, abusive treatment of prisoners of war in the internment camp in Cuba, subjecting immigrants to high levels of governmental scrutiny by creating detention centers for the undocumented immigrants and denying them medical assistance (Bernstein, 2008), as well as censorship on certain politically sensitive publications. “It is far easy to look at what happens in other nations with a negative eye, while overlooking the parallels in the United States” (Neely, 2011, p. 278). Teaching for social responsibility “not only requires an understanding of the abuse of power but also commands the consciousness to see it and the ethical commitment to stop it” (Wolk, 2009, p. 668). Thus, teachers can challenge the American young readers to think more critically about human rights, freedom, propaganda, and justice system in America compared with the situations during the Cultural Revolution. What else can people do during such oppressive circumstances except for using sex as a form of resistance, like Maple or John Lennon? Should they be acquiescent and obedient to the abusive government and manipulated passively by the political system or should they take responsibility to act as active agents for social change in the form of protest and activism? By critically reading his/her world, young people can formulate actions with the goal of disrupting the inequities they identify (Freire, 2001). The famous American historian Howard Zinn (2008) said that, “If you are living in a democratic government, you must have a citizenry investigating it to see if it’s following its charge, and if it’s not following that charge—if it’s sending people to war, spoiling the environment, turning the wealth over to a small group of wealthy individuals—then that calls for disobedience and dissent” (p. 19). Young people involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement give us the best example with their brave political acts. They call into question the capitalist system on which this country is built, they express their frustrations and disappointments about stagnant social upward mobility, and they are
indignant about unfair wealth distribution and bourgeoisie exploitation caused by blatant loopholes in the American political system. Such a large-scale protest is unprecedented within 30 years in the American history. It represents young people’s voice concerning this country’s future direction.

To nurture a new generation of critical thinkers and to create a more democratic and caring world, we need poignant authors, courageous publishers, but more importantly, knowledgeable and insightful teachers. So far the small number of YA books representing China, written either by cultural insiders or outsiders, usually portray this country in a binary manner. China is always depicted as an oppressive state (e.g. Mao’s Last Dancer by Cunxin Li) or as a new benevolent imperial power (e.g. Nine Days by Fred Hiatt). Thus not only more YA titles (authored by domestic writers or translated from native Chinese versions) representing China are needed, but more importantly, they should represent China from different lens so that students in the Western countries can get a more nuanced understanding and balanced perspective through more complex representations. For teachers, critically examining the representations of the Cultural Revolution in young adult literature with students is probably a good start to embark on the journey of reading for social justice and a better world.

References


**More to Explore**

1. Important Documentaries about the Cultural Revolution

David Hinton (Director). (2002): *Children of the Revolution*. New York, NY: Asian Society. This documentary is the British BAFTA Award winner. It is about a group of classical music students at Beijing’s Central Music Conservatory. They cast a retrospective glance at their lost youth during the Cultural Revolution, spending precious time forming Red Guard cliques, criticizing teachers, and laboring in the impoverished agrarian areas. It’s very useful helping students get a good understanding of the “sent-down” experiences of the “educated youth”.


2. Popular Slogans during the Cultural Revolution

“To sweep away all demons and monsters!”
“Liu Shaoqi is a bad egg, bring down the capitalists in the Party!”
“To rebel is justified!”
“Bombard the headquarters!”

3. The Most Popular Song about the Red Guards:

“Red Guards, burning with revolutionary zeal, tested by the storm of class struggle, tempered by battle, our hearts are red. Standing firm, direction clear, our revolutionary spirit strong, we follow the Party with full devotion, we are Chairman Mao’s Red Guards.”

Books Mentioned


