

Study Guide

***Red Scarf Girl* by Ji-li Jiang**

LEXILE 780

The Novel at a Glance**MORE ABOUT THE WRITER**

Jiang, whose parents were both actors, grew up surrounded by actors and drama, and she dreamed of being on the stage herself. However, during the Cultural Revolution, she was not accepted by professional art troupes because of her family's bad political status. Jiang hoped that things would change after the Revolution ended in 1976 when she applied to the Shanghai Drama Institute. Her failure to obtain a place was a devastating blow to Jiang, and it was then that she vowed to write her story and share it with the world.

Jiang decided that, as the opportunities for education were limited for her in China, she would go to the United States. There she lived with an American family who was fascinated by her life in China and her experiences during the Cultural Revolution. They gave her a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and in it wrote these words: "In the hope that one day we will read *The Diary of Ji-li Jiang*." Anne Frank's story inspired Jiang to write her own story from the point of view of a young girl.

The final push to tell Jiang's story came when she was working for a hotel chain in Hawaii. A co-worker asked why Jiang did not have bound feet. Footbinding was an ancient Chinese practice in which young girls' feet were tightly wound in cloth bands to keep them from growing. Jiang was surprised by the question because footbinding had been illegal in China since 1911. "I was shocked: this was like asking 'How come you don't wear a corset?'" Struck by how little her American co-workers knew of China and the Chinese people, she made up her mind to begin writing her story.

Once Jiang found a publisher for her finished story, her editor, Ginee Seo, worked closely with her to make sure that the book could be understood by American readers. References to Chinese culture that might be confusing were developed for clarity. All their work evidently paid off because Jiang has been overwhelmed with praise for the book since its publication.

Jiang originally did not intend *Red Scarf Girl* to be for young people, but she has said that she is "glad it turned out to be a children's book." She has also said, "Maybe from my book readers can learn that we all go through suffering for different reasons. Maybe my story can give readers the courage to make right decisions."

Red Scarf Girl *continued*

BACKGROUND**Social Studies**

In 1966, Mao Ze-dong, the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, initiated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to put China back on what he believed to be the true path to Communism. Red Guards—groups of high school and university students—were formed to combat the Four Olds—old ideas, culture, customs, and habits. Traditional ideas, such as respect for teachers and learning, were rejected, and schools were closed. Many party officials were overthrown, and the country was in chaos. After Mao's death the Chinese government ended the Cultural Revolution.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jiang Ji-li is a twelve-year-old girl growing up in China. She is happy, bright, and ambitious, but her fortunes change as the Cultural Revolution sweeps across China. She and her family suffer because of their class status.

Jiang Ji-yong is Ji-li's younger brother. He becomes a target for bullies, also because of the family's class status.

Jiang Ji-yun is the younger sister of Ji-li and Ji-yong.

Jiang Xi-reng, Ji-li's father, is an actor who works at the Children's Art Theater. He is held prisoner at the theater when false accusations are made against him.

Chen Ying is Ji-li's mother. Once an actress, she now works in a sporting-goods store. She has occasional bouts of illness that make it necessary for Ji-li to take on more responsibility. Chen Ying writes a letter protesting the abuses to the family. The letter is discovered during a search by the Red Guard.

Grandma is Xi-reng's mother. She lives with the family and helps take care of the children. Because her husband was a wealthy landowner, the whole family is given a poor class status.

Song Po-po, originally the children's nanny and now the family's housekeeper, lives in a room downstairs. When the political situation forces the Jiangs to let her go, Song Po-po continues to care for the family.

An Yi, Ji-li's best friend, also suffers under the Cultural Revolution. Her mother is humiliated, and her grandmother is driven to suicide.

Du Hai is one of Ji-li's classmates, a terrible student, and a bully. His mother is the Neighborhood Party Committee Secretary, ensuring that Du Hai has a good class status.

Chang Hong is a girl of excellent class status who befriends Ji-li.

Bai Shan is a boy who is ambitious and bright, like Ji-li. He shows interest in Ji-li, but she is afraid to respond to him.

Six-Fingers is a neighborhood man who is responsible for most of the searches and arrests.

Red Scarf Girl *continued*

Thin-Face is Ji-li's name for a man who tries to get her to testify against her father. He leads the search of the Jiang house that discovers the incriminating letter written by Ji-li's mother.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Check the **glossary** (pp. 273–285) for names and terms that are important in the memoir. For other unfamiliar words, look for context clues to meanings before looking in a dictionary.

Part I

exemplary, p. 3
exploitation, p. 25
fervor, p. 38
affront, p. 44
elite, p. 63

Part II

elation, p. 72
indignant, p. 85
vulnerable, p. 86
sullen, p. 102
dirge, p. 115
leniency, p. 133

Part III

disheveled, p. 144
conspicuous, p. 172
vigorous, p. 174
brusquely, p. 183
tenuous, p. 184

Part IV

oblivious, p. 235
resolute, p. 241
methodical, p. 249
barren, p. 260