THE RED GUARDS

Ji-li Jiang

In the following excerpt, Ji-li Jiang is 12 years old, and the Cultural Revolution is underway. At first a loyal follower of Chairman Mao, Ji-li's perspective changes after her late grandfather's status as a wealthy landlord becomes known. Mao's government considers landlords and their families possible enemies of the people. Now classified by the Red Guards as having "suspicious status," the Jiang family lives in fear.

om got home from work that evening looking nervous. She whispered to Dad and Grandma, and as soon as we finished dinner, she told us to go outside and play.

"We have something to take care of," she said. I knew this had something to do with the Cultural Revolution. I wished she would just say so. We were too old to be fooled like little children. But I didn't say anything and went outside with the others. •

When it was nearly dark, Ji-yun and I went back home, leaving Ji-yong¹ with his friends.

As we entered the apartment, I smelled smoke, <u>acrid</u> and choking. I looked around in alarm. But Grandma was sitting alone in the main room, showing no sign of worry.

"Grandma, is there a fire?" we shouted anxiously. "Don't you smell the smoke?"

AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

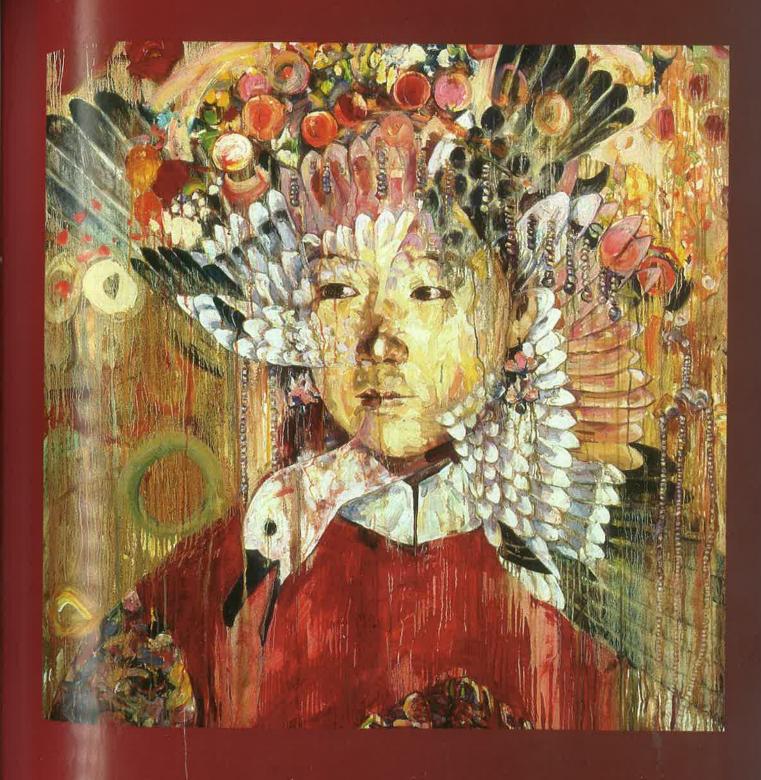
The author is an adult but writes the events as a young girl. Why might this help the reader better understand her perspective than if she had written the events as an adult?

acrid (ăk'rĭd) adj. harsh and sharp in taste or odor

ANALYZE VISUALS

What **mood**, or feeling, do the colors in this painting help create?

^{1.} Ji-yun (jē-yŭn) ... Ji-yong (jē-yŏng): the author's younger sister and brother.



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il on Liu"Hush, hush!" Grandma pulled us to her quickly. "It's nothing. They're just burning some pictures." We looked puzzled. "Your mother heard today that photos of people in old-fashioned long gowns and mandarin jackets are considered fourolds.² So your parents are burning them in the bathroom."

"Can we go watch?" I loved looking at pictures, especially pictures of all those uncles and aunts I had never met.

Grandma shook her head. I winked at Ji-yun, and we both threw ourselves into her arms, begging and pleading. As always, she gave in, and went to the bathroom door to ask Mom and Dad.

Mom opened the door a crack and let us in.

The bathroom was filled with thick smoke that burned our eyes and made us cough. Dad passed us a glass of water. "We can't open the window any wider," he said. "The neighbors might notice the smoke and

report us."

Mom and Dad were sitting on small wooden stools. On the floor was a tin washbowl full of ashes and a few pictures disappearing into flames. At Dad's side was a stack of old photo albums, their black covers stained and faded with age. Dad was looking through the albums, page by page, tearing out any pictures that might be fourolds. He put them in a pile next to Mom, who put them into the fire.

"Mom, this one doesn't have long gowns or anything," Ji-yun said.
"Can't we keep it?"

"The Red Guards might say that only a rich child could ride a camel. And besides, Grandma's wearing a fur coat." She threw it into the fire. Mom was right, I thought. A picture like that was fourolds.

The flames licked around the edges of the picture. The corners curled up, then turned brown. The brown spread quickly toward the center, swallowing Grandma, then the camel, and finally Dad's woolen hat.

Picture after picture was thrown into the fire. Each in turn curled, melted, and disappeared. The ashes in the washbowl grew deeper. Finally there were no more pictures left. Mom poured the ashes into the toilet and flushed them away.

That night I dreamed that the house was on fire. . . .

B MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 36–39. What does this information suggest about how Ji-li's father used to live?

C IDENTIFY SYMBOL

Consider what the photographs symbolize to the Red Guards. What might the photographs symbolize to the Jiang family? Record this information in your chart.

^{2.} mandarin jackets ... fourolds: Mandarin jackets are fancy jackets with narrow, stand-up collars. They were one of the "fourolds"—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits—that were forbidden during the Cultural Revolution.

arly in the morning Song Po-po³ rushed upstairs to tell us the news. All the neighbors were saying that a knife had been found in the communal⁴ garbage bin. The Neighborhood Dictatorship Group had declared this to be an illegal weapon, so the entire bin had been searched and some incompletely burned pictures found. In one of them they recognized my Fourth Aunt.⁵ Because my Fourth Uncle had fled to Hong Kong right before Liberation, her family was on the Neighborhood Party Committee's list of black families.⁶ The weapon was automatically associated with the pictures, and that was enough for Six-Fingers⁷ to report to the powerful Neighborhood Party Committee.⁸

All day we were terrified. Grandma and the three of us went to the park immediately after breakfast. This time none of us wanted to play.

We just sat together on Grandma's bench.

"Will the Red Guards come?" Ji-yun asked.

"Maybe they will, sweetie," Grandma answered. "We just don't know." She took out her knitting. I tried to to do the same, but I kept finding myself staring into space with no idea of where I was in the pattern. Ji-yun and Ji-yong ran off to play but always came back to the bench after a few minutes. At four o'clock Grandma sent me to see if anything was happening at home.

I cautiously walked into the alley, alert for anything unusual, but there was no sound of drums or gongs or noise at all. The mop was still on the balcony. I looked into our lane. There were no trucks. Everything seemed calm, and I told Grandma it was safe to go home. •

Mom and Dad both came home earlier than usual. Dinner was short and nearly silent. Soon after dinner we turned the lights off and got into bed, hoping that the day would end peacefully after all. I lay for a long while without sleeping but finally drifted into a restless doze. When I heard pounding on the door downstairs, I was not sure whether it was real or a dream.

It was real.

I heard my cousin You-mei ask bravely, "Who's there?"

AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Reread lines 63–76. What words and phrases show the intense feeling the author experienced that day?

^{3.} Song Po-po (sông pō-pō): Jiang family's downstairs neighbor, friend, and former housekeeper.

^{4.} communal: used by everyone in the building.

^{5.} Fourth Aunt: Ji-li Jiang's aunt. "Fourth" means the fourth child born to the parents.

^{6.} **Because my... black families:** The author's uncle had gone to Hong Kong (at that time independent from China) just before Chairman Mao established his government. Because of this, the Communist Party officers in charge of the neighborhood listed the family as opponents of Communism.

^{7.} Six-Fingers: the nickname for Mr. Ni, chairman of the Neighborhood Dictatorship Group, who had six fingers on one of his hands.

^{8.} Neighborhood Party Committee: the Communist Party officers in charge of a neighborhood.

^{9.} **The mop...balcony:** a signal used by the Jiangs to indicate to family members returning home that the Red Guards were not in the house.



Detail of Women Warriors I (2004), Hung Liu. Oil on canvas, 24" × 42". © Hung Liu.

Six-Fingers's voice replied, "The Red Guards. They're here to search your house. Open up!"

They rushed into Fourth Aunt's apartment downstairs.

At first we could not hear much. Then we heard more: doors slamming, a cry from Hua-hua, 10 crash after crash of dishes breaking overhead, and the **indistinct** voices of the Red Guards.

By this time we were all awake, but no one turned on a light or said anything. We all lay and held our breaths and listened, trying to determine what was going on downstairs. No one even dared to turn over. My whole body was tense. Every sound from my Fourth Aunt's room made me stiffen with dread.

Thirty minutes passed, then an hour. In spite of the fear I began to feel sleepy again.

I was jolted awake by shouts and thunderous knocks. Someone was shouting Dad's name. "Jiang Xi-reng!" Get up! Jiang Xi-reng!"

indistinct (ĭn'dĭ-stĭngkt') adj. not clearly recognizable or understandable

ANALYZE VISUALS
Does this painting
give you a positive or
negative sense of the
Red Guards?

^{10.} Hua-hua (hwä-hwä): You-mei's daughter; Fourth Aunt's granddaughter.

^{11.} Jiang Xi-reng (jyäng shē-rĕng): Ji-li's father, like other people in China, is called by his surname first.

Dad went to the door. "What do you want?"

"Open up!" Six-Fingers shouted. "This is a search in passing! The Red Guards are going to search your home in passing."

We often asked somebody to buy something in passing or get information in passing, but I had never heard of searching a house in passing.

Dad opened the door.

The first one in was Six-Fingers, wearing an undershirt and dirty blue shorts and flip-flops. Behind him were about a dozen teenaged Red Guards. Though the weather was still quite warm, they all wore tightly belted army uniforms. Their leader was a **zealous**, loud-voiced girl with short hair and large eyes.

"What's your relationship with the Jiangs living downstairs?" the girl velled, her hand **aggressively** on her hip.

"He is her brother-in-law," Six-Fingers answered before Dad could open his mouth.

"Oh, so you're a close relative," she said, as if she only now realized that. "Leniency for confession, severity for resistance! Hand over your weapons now, or we will be forced to search the house." She stood up straight and stared at Dad.

"What weapons?" Dad asked calmly. "We have no—"

"Search!" She cut Dad off with a shouted order and shoved him aside. At the wave of her arm the Red Guards behind her stormed in. Without speaking to each other, they split into three groups and charged toward our drawers, cabinets, and chests. The floor was instantly strewn with their contents.

They demanded that Mom and Dad open anything that was locked, while we children sat on our beds, staring in paralyzed fascination. To my surprise, it was not as frightening as I had imagined through the weeks of waiting. Only Little White¹² was panicked by the crowd and the noise. She scurried among the open chests until she was kicked by a Red Guard. ¹³⁰ Then she ran up into the attic and did not come down.

I watched one boy going through the wardrobe. He took each piece of clothing off its hanger and threw it onto the floor behind him. He went carefully through a drawer and unrolled the neatly paired socks, tossing them over his shoulder one by one.

I turned my head and saw another boy opening my desk drawer. He swept his hand through it and jumbled everything together before removing the drawer and turning it upside down on the floor. Before he could examine the contents, another one called him away to help move a chest.

zealous (zĕl'əs) *adj.* eager and enthusiastic

E MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 106–110. Why do you think the Red Guard is made up mostly of teenagers?

aggressively

(ə-grĕs'ĭv-lē) adv. in a manner showing readiness to attack

leniency (lē'nē-ən-sē) n. tolerance; gentleness

MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 125–130. Jiang stares "in paralyzed fascination." Why is the experience not as frightening as she had imagined it would be?

^{12.} Little White: the Jiang family's cat.

All my treasures were scattered on the floor. The butterfly fell out of its glass box; one wing was crushed under a bottle of glass beads. My collection of candy wrappers had fallen out of their notebook and were crumpled under my stamp album.

My stamp album! It had been a birthday gift from Grandma when I started school, and it was my dearest treasure. For six years I had been getting canceled stamps from my friends, carefully soaking them to get every bit of envelope paper off. I had collected them one by one until I had complete sets. I had even bought some inexpensive sets with my own allowance. I loved my collection, even though I knew I should not. With the start of the Cultural Revolution all the stamp shops were closed down, because stamp collecting was considered bourgeois. Now I just knew something terrible was going to happen to it. **6**

I looked at the Red Guards. They were still busy moving the chest. I slipped off the bed and tiptoed across the room. If I could hide it before they saw me . . . I stooped down and reached for the book.

"Hey, what are you doing?" a voice demanded. I spun around in alarm. It was the Red Guard leader.

"I . . . I didn't do anything," I said guiltily, my eyes straying toward the stamp album.

"A stamp album." She picked it up. "Is this yours?" I nodded fearfully.

"You've got a lot of fourolds for a kid," she sneered as she flipped through it. "Foreign stamps too," she remarked. "You little xenophile." "I . . . I'm not . . ." I blushed as I fumbled for words.

The girl looked at Ji-yong and Ji-yun, who were still sitting on their beds, watching, and she turned to another Red Guard. "Get the kids into the bathroom so they don't get in the way of the revolution." She threw the stamp album casually into the bag of things to be **confiscated** and went back downstairs. She didn't even look at me.

•• I

Inside the bathroom we could still hear the banging of furniture and the shouting of the Red Guards. Ji-yun lay with her head in my lap, quietly sobbing, and Ji-yong sat in silence.

After a long time the noise died down. Dad opened the bathroom door, and we fearfully came out.

The apartment was a mess. The middle of the floor was strewn with the contents of the overturned chests and drawers. Half of the clothes had been taken away. The rest were scattered on the floor along with some old

AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Reread lines 140–152. What do you learn about the author's attitude toward the Cultural Revolution?

confiscate (kŏn'fĭ-skāt') v. to take and keep something that belongs to someone else

☐ IDENTIFY SYMBOL

The stamp album symbolizes something different to Jiang than it does to the leader of the Red Guards. In your chart, record what it symbolizes to each of them.

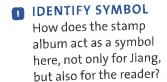
^{13.} **bourgeois** (bŏor-zhwä'): related to members of the middle class—that is, to people like merchants or professionals. Those labeled *bourgeois* were considered suspicious by the Communist Party.

^{14.} xenophile (zĕn'ə-fīl'): person who loves foreigners and foreign objects.

copper coins. The chests themselves had been thrown on top of each other when the Red Guards decided to check the walls for holes where weapons could be hidden. Grandma's German clock lay upside down on the floor with the little door on its back torn off.

I looked for my things. The wing of the butterfly had been completely knocked off the body. The bottle holding the glass beads had smashed, and beads were rolling all over the floor. The trampled candy wrappers looked like trash.

And the stamp album was gone forever. ∞ 1





Wildflower (2003), Hung Liu. Five-color lithograph with gold leaf and collage, Ed. 20, 25" x 19". © Hung Liu.

ANALYZE VISUALS
What details in this
piece of art are also
mentioned in the
memoir?

Reading for Information

INTERVIEW In "The Red Guards," you read about some of Ji-li Jiang's experiences during the Cultural Revolution. In the following interview, she explains her reasons for sharing her story with young readers.

BACK FORWARD

STOP

REFRESH

HOME

PRINT



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AN INTERVIEW WITH JI-LI JIANG

Why did you write Red Scarf Girl for young people instead of adults?

In 1984 I moved to the States. The first year, I lived with an American family. They were very interested in my life in China. Using my limited English, I shared some of my stories with them. One day they gave me a present, a book, The Diary of Anne Frank. Inside they wrote: "In the hope that one day we will read the diary of Ji-li Jiang." Of course, I was very moved by the story, and also, I was inspired to write my own story through a little girl's eyes, instead of as an adult looking back. Honestly speaking, I didn't target my readers before I wrote it, but I am glad it turned out to be a children's book. I used to be a teacher in China. If my book has an impact on the kids who read it, I will feel most rewarded . . .

Why did you leave China?

After the Cultural Revolution, things didn't change much. Rigid policies and restrictions kept me from achieving my dream: to enter the Shanghai Drama Institute. I was not allowed

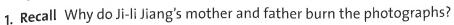
to audition. When the universities re-opened, I passed the exam, but because of my family's political situation, I was only accepted into a less prestigious university. After frustration upon frustration, when America opened the door to students from China, I decided to go to the United States. At that time, my only option was to go overseas and study in America. . . .

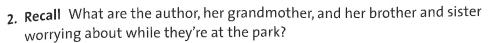
Ji-li means "lucky and beautiful," a name your parents carefully selected for you. Do you consider yourself lucky?

Yes, I consider myself quite lucky.
Despite everything I experienced in
China, I have never lacked for love from
my family, my friends, and also God.
After surviving the Cultural Revolution,
I find myself more sensitive to the
beauty of nature and the human spirit.
I am grateful for having my mind in
peace, grateful to have experienced
other cultures and lifestyles, and
especially grateful that I have been
able to do something meaningful and
enjoyable to me.

Comprehension =







3. Clarify Why do the Red Guards search Fourth Aunt's apartment?

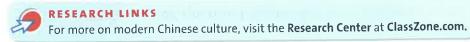
Literary Analysis

- 4. Draw Conclusions The lives of Ji-li Jiang and her family have changed because of the Cultural Revolution. What personal rights and freedoms have they lost?
- 5. Examine Author's Purpose Reread the interview with Ji-li Jiang on page 276. Was Ji-li Jiang's reason for writing her memoir to inform or explain, to persuade, to entertain, or a combination of these? Support your answer with information from the selection.
- 6. Identify Author's Perspective On a chart like the one shown, describe the author's perspective on each topic.
- 7. Analyze Symbol Look at the diagram you completed while reading "The Red Guards." Explain how the symbols and what they mean help you to understand the events that Jiang is writing about.

Topic	Perspective
her family's experience	
the Cultural Revolution	

Extension and Challenge

- 8. Inquiry and Research In her memoir, Ji-li Jiang calls her stamp collection her "dearest treasure." Stamp collecting is a common pastime, but people collect all sorts of items. Do research to find out some of the other items that people collect. Present your findings to the class.
- **SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** The Cultural Revolution began in China in 1966. This set up a period of chaos and bloodshed that lasted for years. Conduct research to find out what life is like in China today. How have things changed? When did they change? Share your findings with your classmates.





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STANDARDS

READING STANDARD

symbols in literature

4.5 Identify recurring themes and

Street in modern-day Shanghai, China