Modern China
Understanding the Cultural Revolution

Students will be introduced to modern Chinese history with the help of Ji-li Jiang’s Red Scarf Girl. Students will learn about the Cultural Revolution (ca. 1964–1976) through newspapers, Cultural Revolution–era posters, and a guided visit to Yin Yu Tang, a 200-year-old Chinese house at PEM that will help them imagine life in rural China during the Cultural Revolution.

Red Guards Destroy the Old and Establish the New

Since August 20, the young Red Guards of Peking, detachments of students, have taken to the streets. With the revolutionary rebel spirit of the proletariat, they have launched a furious offensive to sweep away reactionary, decadent bourgeois and feudal influences, and all old ideas, culture, customs and habits. This mounting revolutionary storm is sweeping the cities of the entire nation. “Let Mao Tsetung’s thought occupy all positions; use it to transform the mental outlook of the whole of society; sweep away all ghosts and monsters; brush aside all stumbling-blocks and resolutely carry the great proletarian cultural revolution through to the end!” This is the militant aim of the young revolutionary fighters. Their revolutionary actions have everywhere received the enthusiastic support of the revolutionary masses.

In Shanghai. In this huge city which has the largest concentration of capitalists in the country and which, until the liberation, had long been under the rule of the imperialists and domestic reactionaries, the revolutionary students and the broad masses of workers and staff have taken up their iron brooms to sweep away all old habits and customs. The show
windows of the Wing On Co., one of the biggest department stores in the city, are plastered with big-character posters put up by the Red Guards and workers and staff of the store, proposing that “Wing On” (Eternal Peace) should be changed into “Yong Hong” (Red For Ever) or “Yong Dou” (Struggle For Ever). The posters point out that in the old society the boss of the store chose the name “Wing On” because he wanted to be left in peace for ever to exploit the working people. “For a long time now the store has been in the hands of the people and we are certainly not going to tolerate this odious name a day longer,” say the posters.

In “The Great World,” the biggest amusement centre of Shanghai, workers and staff together with the Red Guards took down the old name sign which was several meters long. When the last character of the sign was brought down, thousands of revolutionary people in the streets and in the windows of neighboring buildings applauded and cheered: “Long live Chairman Mao!” and “Long live the great proletarian cultural revolution!”

The waterfront of the Whangpoo River in Shanghai was, until the liberation, the centre of imperialist plunder of the Chinese people. The buildings here have still carried many reminders of the imperialists and here the Red Guards and revolutionary workers and staff have gone in for revolutionizing in a big way. They have taken down all the imperialist signs from walls and removed the bronze lions outside one of the big buildings.

The revolutionary workers and staff of Shanghai barber shops have adopted revolutionary measures in response to the proposals of the Red Guards: They no longer cut and set hair in the grotesque fashions indulged in by a small minority of people; they cut out those services specially worked out for the bourgeoisie such as manicuring, beauty treatments, and so on. In those shops which sold only goods catering to the needs of a small minority of people, workers and staff have taken the revolutionary decision to start supplying the people at large with good popular commodities at low prices.

From *Morning Sun* Web Site (Long Bow Group, 2003), www.morningsun.org.
**Understanding Motive**

Make a chart that identifies five examples of strong language and metaphors used to describe the revolutionaries and the bourgeoisie. Can you tell how the writer feels about the people and the actions he or she describes?

**Uncovering Assumptions**

The newspaper article reports that barbershops have stopped providing “services specially worked out for the bourgeoisie such as manicuring, beauty treatments, and so on” and that instead, these shops have decided to “start supplying the people at large with good popular commodities at low prices.” After reviewing the definition of communism, discuss why communist revolutionaries would make these demands.

In 1966, Ji-li Jiang turned twelve. An outstanding student and leader, she had everything: brains, the admiration of her peers, and a bright future in China’s Communist Party. But that year, China’s leader, Mao Zedong, launched the Cultural Revolution, and everything changed. Over the next few years, Ji-li and her family were humiliated and scorned by former friends, neighbors, and co-workers. They lived in constant terror of arrest. Finally, with the detention of her father, Ji-li faced the most difficult choice of her life.

Told with simplicity and grace, this is a true story of one family’s courage and determination during one of the most terrifying eras of the twentieth century.


**Analyzing Text**

Compile several of the sayings from the *da zi bao*, the Chinese communist propaganda posters that criticize the educational system. Determine whether these sayings are made up mostly of fact or opinion.

Cite other instances in world and U.S. history when propaganda has been used toward political ends. Include examples of strong language in the American press today.

**Text-to-World Questions**

Compare the newspaper description of events in Shanghai with the description provided by Ji-li Jiang in the chapter entitled “Destroy the Four Olds!” How do these sources support or contradict each other? How does the newspaper article compare with Grandma’s reaction to the news that the shop signs had been destroyed? How does Grandma’s reaction compare with those of the newspaper reporters? Elaborate.

**Writing Project**

Imagine you are writing for a newspaper during the Cultural Revolution. Like the Chinese reporters from that time, it is mandatory that you show your support for Chairman Mao through the use of strong language and metaphor.

✪ Write a detailed newspaper article that depicts some events that occurred during the Cultural Revolution.

✪ Don’t forget that a good article contains the answers to the following questions: Who? What? When? Why? Where?

✪ Include a minimum of four illustrations with a brief explanation of each.

✪ Title your newspaper with an issue number and date.

✪ Title each of your articles, and add your name.

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**MEDIA COMPONENTS**

*Morning Sun DVD ♦
Morning Sun Web Site ♦

**Morning Sun** (DVD)

Directed by Geramie Barmé, Carma Hinton, Richard Gordon

Long Bow Group, 2003

Running time: 2 hours

The video *Morning Sun* is a two-hour documentary film that creates an inner history of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (ca. 1964–1976). It provides a multi-perspective view of a tumultuous period as seen through the eyes—and reflected in the hearts and minds—of members of the high school generation that was born around the time of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and that came of age in the 1960s. Others join them in creating a conversation about the period and the psycho-emotional topography of Maoist China, as well as the enduring legacy of that period.
A range of techniques and perspectives are presented on the Morning Sun Web site that reflect on the origins and history of the Cultural Revolution (ca. 1964–1976). This period is approached from a panoptic perspective, encompassing a broad overview while allowing the user to focus in on individual histories, narratives, and events that reveal the complex contradictory forces that led to an era of unrivaled revolutionary fervor and political turmoil in China.

**Making Inferences**
Look at Art Card C7, an image of Chairman Mao, or select another image of Mao from the Morning Sun Web site. How does the artist use images to reinforce Mao’s leadership? Art Card C7 is a poster from 1952, more than ten years before the start of the Cultural Revolution. What visual elements convey themes that were emphasized during the Cultural Revolution? What are the themes? Would anything have changed if the poster had been designed during the Cultural Revolution? If so, what?

**Object-to-Text Questions**
Look at each Art Card. Determine if the objects pictured would be associated with one of the Four Olds. Explain why or why not.
The Gallery lesson will focus on a day in the life of Yin Yu Tang during the Cultural Revolution.

Invite students to make *da zi bao*, or propaganda posters. Look at the images from the PEM Art Cards or the *Morning Sun* Web site. What elements do you think make the poster effective? What visual elements are emphasized? What colors are used? How do these selections reinforce word choices? Use some of these design elements to create your own *da zi bao* or Chairman Mao poster.

Social Studies Standards: 6th NEA 4, 7th Concepts and Skills 4, 5
English Language Arts Strands: 2, 4, 5, 9,13, 15, 20, 26
Visual Arts Learning Standards: 2, 6,10


