

Red Scarf Girl
A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution
By Ji-Li Jiang

Chapter One:

I was born on Chinese New Year.

Carefully, my parents chose my name: Ji-li, meaning lucky and beautiful. They hoped that I would be the happiest girl in the world.

And I was.

I was happy because I was always loved and respected. I was proud because I was able to excel and always expected to succeed. I was trusting, too. I never doubted what I was told: "Heaven and earth are great, but greater still is the kindness of the Communist Party; father and mother are dear, but dearer still is Chairman Mao."

With my red scarf, the emblem of the Young Pioneers, tied around my neck, and my heart bursting with joy, I achieved and grew every day until that fateful year, 1966.

That year I was twelve years old, in sixth grade.

That year the Cultural Revolution started.

The Liberation Army Dancer

Chairman Mao, our beloved leader, smiled down at us from his place above the blackboard. The sounds and smells of the tantalising May afternoon drifted in through the window. The sweet breeze carried the scent of new leaves and tender young grass and rippled the paper slogan below Chairman Mao's picture: study hard and advance every day. In the corner behind me the breeze also rustled the papers hanging from the Students' Garden, a beautifully decorated piece of cardboard that displayed exemplary work. One of them was my latest perfect math test.

We were having music class, but we couldn't keep our minds on the teacher's directions. We were all confused by the two-part harmony of the Young Pioneers' Anthem. "We are Young Pioneers, successors to Communism. Our red scarves flutter on our chests," we sang over and over, trying to get the timing right. The old black pump organ wheezed and squeaked as impatiently as we did. We made another start, but Wang Da-yong burst out a beat early, and the whole class broke into laughter.

Just then Principal Long appeared at the door. She walked in, looking less serious than usual, and behind her was a stranger, a beautiful young woman dressed in the People's Liberation Army uniform. A Liberation Army soldier! She was slim and stood straight as a reed. Her eyes sparkled, and her long braids, tied with red ribbons, swung at her waist. There was not a sound in the classroom as all forty of us stared at her in awe.

Principal Long told us to stand up. The woman soldier smiled but did not speak. She walked up and down the aisles, looking at us one by one. When she finished, she spoke quietly with Principal Long. "Tong Chao and Jiang Ji-li," Principal Long announced. "Come with us to the gym." A murmur rose behind us as we left the room. Tong Chao looked at me and I looked at him in wonder as we followed the swinging braids.

The gym was empty.

"I want to see how flexible you are. Let me lift your leg," the Liberation Army woman said in her gentle voice. She raised my right leg over my head in front of me. "Very good! Now I'll support you. Lean over backward as far as you can." That was easy. I bent backward until I could grab my ankles like an acrobat. "That's great!" she said, and her braids swung with excitement.

"This is Jiang Ji-li." Principal Long leaned forward proudly. "She's been studying martial arts since the second grade. She was on the Municipal Children's Martial Arts Team. Their demonstration was even filmed."

The Liberation Army woman smiled sweetly. "That was very good. Now you may go back to your classroom." She patted me on my head before she turned back to test Tong Chao.

I went back to class, but I could not remember the song we were singing. What did the Liberation Army woman want? Could she want to choose me for something? It was too much to contemplate. I hardly moved when the bell rang to end school. Someone told me that the principal wanted to see me. I walked slowly down the hall, surrounded by my shouting and jostling classmates, seeing only the beautiful soldier, feeling only the electric tingle of her soft touch on my head.

The office door was heavy. I pushed it open cautiously. Some students from the other sixth-grade classes were there already. I recognised Wang Qi, a girl in class two, and one of the boys, You Xiao-fan of class four. I didn't know the other boy. The three of them sat nervously and respectfully opposite Principal Long. I slipped into a chair next to them.

Principal Long leaned forward from her big desk. "I know you must be wondering about the Liberation Army soldier," she said. She sounded cheerful and excited. "Why did she come? Why did she want you to do back bends?" She looked at us one by one and then took a long sip from her tea mug as if she wanted to keep us guessing. "She was Comrade Li from the Central Liberation Army Arts Academy."

I slowly took a deep breath.

"She is recruiting students for the dance training class. She selected you four to audition. It's a great honour for Xin Er Primary School. I'm very proud of all of you, and I know you'll do your best."

I did not hear the rest of her words. I saw myself in a new Liberation Army uniform, slim and standing straight as a reed, long braids swinging at my waist. A Liberation Army soldier! One of the heroes admired by all, who helped Chairman Mao liberate China from oppression and defeated the Americans in Korea. And a performer, just like my mother used to be, touring the country, the world, to tell everyone about the New China that Chairman Mao had built and how it was becoming stronger and stronger.

I couldn't help giving Wang Qi a silly smile.