

## China's Cultural Revolution

BY CURRICULUM DEVELOPERS GREGORY FRANCIS  
AND STEFANIE LAMB

STANFORD PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL  
EDUCATION (SPICE), 2005

SOFTCOVER INCLUDES CD-ROM WITH TWENTY-NINE IMAGES, AUDIO  
CD, AND BOOK *RED SCARF GIRL*

REVIEWED BY CINDY MARTÍNEZ

When the time came in the school year to teach about China and China's Cultural Revolution, I would sigh. Not because I didn't find China fascinating (I do) or think it was important (it's incredibly important), but because I didn't like my unit. Reading, lecture, questions, timeline, test, big yawn. The students got the material, but not the feel for the period or a real understanding for how it evolved. The questions—how and why did so many people let it happen?—were not answered for them. I hadn't found what I needed to make it better. Then, two years ago, the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) produced just what I needed. I received an email about a four-day training at Stanford University on Japan, China, and Korea. I applied, got accepted, and attended one of the best trainings ever. There I was introduced to *China's Cultural Revolution*, a fresh-off-the-press curriculum unit developed by Gregory Francis and Stefanie Lamb, full of engaging, thought-provoking, and easy-to-use lessons that give students the opportunity to demonstrate their creativity and variety of strengths.

Being standard American teenagers, my students had trouble comprehending the forces exerted on the lives of individuals in a totalitarian society, where the state is the focus of all. A major strength of this unit is that it leans heavily on the perspective of Chinese students. This allows my students to identify with them and builds their awareness about how student life in China at the time focused on, and was controlled by, the principles of the Cultural Revolution. Through primary sources, my students not only read, but also participate in activities that help them understand the period and better address essential questions.

Lesson One provides an overview of the Cultural Revolution. It starts with a discussion of the meaning of revolution and a twist on the standard timeline. Students are given a mixed up timeline of events from 1900 to 1989. They then use any resource at their disposal to put the events in order. I found students had to read more and learn more to place the events in order than if I had just given them the standard assignment of finding a set number of events to put on the timeline. They had to find clues in the brief descriptions they were given, and actually read the resources they were using instead of just scanning for a date and paraphrasing a description. The background reading that follows the timeline "Introduction to the Cultural Revolution" includes more detail than the textbook, while not being overly long. It supplies a concise timeline of events leading up to and through the Cultural Revolution. Definitions are prominently displayed in the margins, drawing attention to key concepts.

Focusing on the effects the Cultural Revolution had on Chinese citizens, Lesson Two begins with students participating in teacher-led Daily Morning Exercises, one of three activities in this lesson that gets

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students out of their chairs. Grace is not my middle name, but sometimes it is good to let the students see one flounder about and look ridiculous. I like to think it encourages them to take on new challenges. With the music playing and the moves displayed on the overhead, I led the students in the exercises. Along with giving them a good laugh at their uncoordinated teacher (who was replaced by a more coordinated student), students discussed how this sort of daily activity would affect a student's outlook. It was a hook that drew them in.

Another application of the timeline concept included giving half the students a date and title card, the other half a description. After finding their match, they had to put themselves in order in the classroom. Then, instead of reading the description verbatim, they paraphrased their event for the class—a skill students always need to practice.

Then there was the Revolutionary Song activity. Groups are given lyrics to a revolutionary song to perform for the class with a tune of their own choosing. My students provided a range of styles from Rap to Beat to Doo Wop. They were beautiful! Our students are so creative when we give them the chance. Once again, great discussions followed. One group cut down their song by eliminating a repetitious line. We discussed how the purpose of the song might make it necessary to keep the repetition and how that repetition would affect the singers and audience.

Lesson Three revolved around propaganda poster analysis. In small groups, students moved from poster to poster analyzing the various elements—color, characters, layout—while discussing the propaganda aspects of each poster. This exercise gave art students and visual learners a chance to shine. Then, as a group, we discussed what they discovered in the poster analysis. Having already discussed it in small groups and having made notes on a chart, students felt more comfortable contributing to the class discussion. Along

with discussing the individual impact of each poster, we discussed the overall effect of so many posters hanging everywhere.

Lesson Four incorporates reading the book *Red Scarf Girl* by Ji-Li Jiang, a first-person account of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>1</sup> As much as I wanted to have all my students read the book as a class, time was too limited. My students often ask for extra credit, and this may go on the extra credit list. The strength of this unit is the flexibility it gives to use select pieces without using the whole.

Along with the get up and move activities are the sit, read, discuss, and write activities, including several primary source readings—from a comparison of Mao and Confucius quotes, to students' experiences during the Cultural Revolution, to modern day textbook interpretations of the Cultural Revolution. Proof of how engaging the topics were became evident as I listened in on wonderful table discussions as I walked around the room. Discussion activities in this lesson allow students to give voice to their ideas and to listen to others, both in small groups and as a class.

Skills and content in this unit transfer readily to other classes, especially World History, when students study totalitarian regimes and analyze propaganda techniques. Cause and effect, along with presentation skills, are used throughout the unit. Writing is vitally important to our students and an integral part of the unit, but some lessons allow other student skills to shine—singing, dancing, verbal communication, leadership, and visual interpretation.

Formal training on the unit is unnecessary. This past year, my social studies department had two wonderful student teachers. I handed the unit over to them and they each used it in their own way with only the instruction and discussion a student teacher usually needs from a mentor. One found the unit so useful she used it as the focus for a major college project.

I have used this unit twice; it will take another year or two to incorporate it into my class just the way I want. The unit puts together all the resources I would have wanted if I had had the time to search for them myself. Many would not have been available to me, even if I had the time—mostly due to lack of access and translation issues.


In addition, the unit comes with a compact disc that includes music and visuals of the propaganda posters. Give yourself enough time to get the resources printed, since some copy centers will not copy materials due to a misunderstanding about copyright law. Don't wait until the last second, especially when it involves photocopying!

This exceptional curriculum unit will be used for years. To learn more about the unit and how to order it, visit the SPICE Web site at [http://spice.stanford.edu/catalog/chinas\\_cultural\\_revolution/](http://spice.stanford.edu/catalog/chinas_cultural_revolution/). ■

#### NOTES

1. Jiang, Ji-Li, *The Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* (Scholastic, Inc., 1999).

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