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Ying Chang Compestine's newest book brings Mao's Cultural Revolution to devastating life



By [MARTHA ROSS](#) | Bay Area News Group
PUBLISHED: July 15, 2024 at 11:28 a.m.



Ying Chang Compestine autographs her new book "Growing Up under a Red Flag; A memoir of surviving the Chinese Cultural Revolution" at Linden Tree Books in Los Altos, Calif., on Saturday, May 11, 2024. (Shae Hammond/Bay

Lafayette author Ying Chang Compestine understands that China's Cultural Revolution might not be an obvious topic for an illustrated children's book.

But Compestine isn't the first writer to use a children's book to introduce young readers to an important time in history or to help them understand a sensitive topic. And the prolific author has written about this dark time in China's history before. Her award-winning, 2007 young adult novel, "Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party," is a fictionalized account of a girl growing up during the Cultural Revolution.



Ying Chang Compestine autographs her new book "Growing Up under a Red Flag; A memoir of surviving the Chinese Cultural Revolution" at Linden Tree Books in Los Altos, Calif., on Saturday, May 11, 2024. (Shae Hammond/Bay Area News Group)

What makes Compestine's new book, "Growing Up Under a Red Flag," especially compelling is that it's a personal account of what actually happened to her family during Mao Zedong's violent, 10-year "class struggle." Between 1966 and 1976, Compestine and her family faced starvation, fear and repression, and her beloved father, a surgeon, was imprisoned after being falsely accused as an American spy.

The book's illustrations, by acclaimed Shanghai-born artist Xinmei Liu, bring Compestine's story to life in vivid detail. Images of a little girl's happy family moments, before the launch of the Cultural Revolution, contrast with stark visuals of her family trying to survive, as their hometown of Wuhan is overrun with Mao propaganda and the violent youth militias known as Red Guards.

Compestine believes it's important to share this history with young audiences. Among many things, the Cultural Revolution demonstrated what happens when a society loses its humanity.

"When I was writing the book, I just kept thinking, is history going to repeat itself?" Compestine said, referring to the recent rise in authoritarianism here and abroad.

"I see what's happening in China, what's happening around the world right now, and I feel like it's very important to understand what it's like when you lose freedom, when you live under a dictatorship, and you have books being banned," Compestine said. "We have banned books now, and I wonder, how can that be? I mean, are we losing that (freedom) now?"



Illustration by Xinmei Liu for Ying Chang Compestine's book, "Growing Up Under a Red Flag." Courtesy of Penguin Young Readers

Compestine said she tried to present the terror of the Cultural Revolution in ways that are suitable for young readers, using language and images that are simple, straightforward and not too explicit. But the book could also read like a graphic novel for older readers, depicting a historical moment that she says is being "erased."

In the U.S., many young people of Chinese descent don't know much about the Cultural Revolution, perhaps because it's a deeply painful topic for their immigrant parents, she said. In China itself, the Communist Party under Xi Jinping has sought to tighten ideological control by cracking down on teachings that are critical of the government.

But Compestine hasn't erased that time from her memory. She was 3 when the Cultural Revolution started, and the book opens on a scene before things got bad. The illustrations depict a smiling little girl in a yellow, chrysanthemum-flower dress and evenings spent with her doting parents, her father teaching her English or reading classic Western fairy tales.

But soon, Western books are banned, and Mao's policies lead to food and power shortages. For a while, Compestine and her father continue her English lessons in secret. Outside their apartment, the Red Guards are seen singing revolutionary songs, dragging away anyone not wearing Mao uniforms and destroying anything considered Western or frivolous, including the flowers in their courtyard garden.

For the last half of the book, the young girl's yellow dress is replaced with a drab Mao uniform and a copy of the leader's "The Little Red Book." Her parents burn their books, letters and family photos, so they won't be arrested for bourgeois sympathies. And when a local Red Guard leader, who had taken up residence in her father's study, publicly denounces her father, Red Guards take him into custody.

Things get worse, as the family worries about her father's safety. Her mother, a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, is forced to work long hours, becoming quiet and sad. Young Compestine is tasked with going out every day to find whatever food is at the market.

Compestine manages to keep up her spirits by sneaking peeks at a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge, given to the family by an American friend, a doctor, and hidden behind a picture of Mao. When her father was being taken into custody, he whispered to her to always “remember the GGB.”

It’s no spoiler to say that Compestine and her family survived the Cultural Revolution. Just before she turned 23, she came to the U.S. for graduate school in sociology and to teach. She married a software engineer, started a family and settled in the Bay Area.

Compestine eventually focused on writing books — YA novels , picture books and cookbooks inspired by Chinese culture and food, a passion spurred by being hungry for much of her childhood. The beautiful garden at her Lafayette home, she said, is a response to the ugliness her family endured more than 50 years ago. With “Growing Up Under a Red Flag,” she hopes that other people won’t forget that time, either.

“I believe these events must be taught and remembered,” she said, “so the younger generation can understand the dangers of extremism and fight for freedom.”