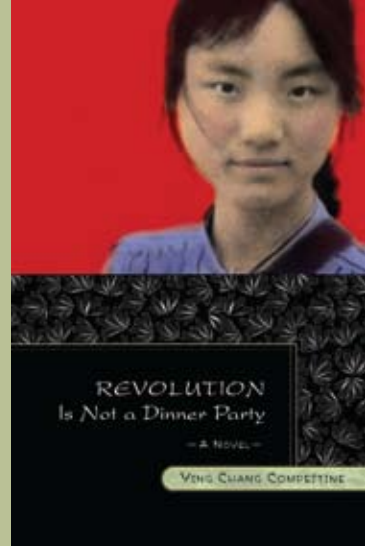


Each column embodies common goals that AASL and CBC share—belief in the power of reading enjoyment and immersive learning, and a commitment to a high level of literacy for every child. Columns are written by authors and illustrators with a wide variety of styles, genres, and publishers. The Children’s Book Council, Inc. (CBC) is a nonprofit trade association of publishers of trade books for children and young adults in the United States.



A Test of CHARACTER

Ying Chang Compestine

Growing up during China’s Cultural Revolution, I constantly hungered for two things: food, because everything was rationed; and books, because they were burned.

In my debut novel, *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party*, there is a scene where Ling, the main character, watches her father burn the family’s books. This event actually occurred in my childhood.

My father, a prestigious surgeon trained by American missionaries, destroyed all his beloved books to protect the family. Yet he continued my education, including English lessons, in secret. He instilled into me a love for books and a yearning for freedom.

For years, the only books we were allowed to read were Mao’s writings and propaganda books that worshipped the Communist regime. The few good books that escaped the flames formed the basis of an underground library. To be invited into one of these lending networks was a sign of great trust

and true friendship. Any careless conduct would bring enormous risks to everyone. Punishment could include hard labor, jail, or public humiliation. Parents often received harsh punishment on behalf of their children.

Each time a good book became available, a long waiting list formed for it. When it was my turn, I never felt there was enough time in a day or an evening to finish a book. I wished I could read it over and over. Reading gave me hope and fueled my dreams. Temporarily I could forget the constant hunger and danger.

At night, electricity to our apartment was cut off to “support the Revolution,” and lamp oil was rationed. So I read many books by dim candlelight. I made sure I locked the door and kept stacks of newspapers or propaganda books nearby. That way, when an unexpected visitor came, I could quickly hide my book among them. My secret forays into these forbidden books were the happiest moments in my childhood. They opened a window to the fascinating outside world.

My hunger for good books grew as I matured. I started to copy passages of books that I enjoyed in a small notebook. When I had no books to read, I reread the passages over and over. Soon, other friends followed in making copies of their favorite passages. Because each of us picked our own favorite passage, when there were no books to read, we would trade our notebooks.

The books we read had often passed through many hands. They were always missing pages, often the beginning and ending. We spent hours arguing over the missing sections. That was when I decided to write my own versions and pass them along with the incomplete books to the next borrower. I often wonder if I hadn’t grown up with those books with missing pages, would I have become a writer today?

Despite this wholesale destruction of the books around me, my hunger for literature only intensified and fueled my desire to escape to a place where books and food abounded. From the stories my father told me about the United States, it sounded

like heaven, and I dreamed of immigrating here.

I learned at a young age to keep my dreams close and to not let go of them. It was those dreams that gave me courage to endure the darkest times.

When Mao died, the universities reopened after being closed for ten years. Yet the competition to attend was intense. In 1980, the year I took the university exam, only one out of one hundred applicants could enter the universities.

I prepared for the entrance exam for two years. It became my purpose in life. I studied twelve hours a day, watched no movies, and took no holidays. In the previous decade, school degenerated into endless political study sessions. We hadn't had any decent textbooks for years, so finding good study guides was a challenge.

When one of my friends located an English grammar book published before the Cultural Revolution, I was thrilled. After I begged her for three days, she decided to break the book into three parts and share it with me and another friend. I never got to read the entire text before the exam. To this day, I am still occasionally awakened by a bad dream where I fail the entrance exam because I didn't get to study the middle section of the book.

Fortunately, I did pass the brutal university exam. It was the happiest time in years for my family. We received endless visitors to congratulate us. Among twenty students in the hospital compound who took the exam, I was the only one who passed it.

For the first time, I did something against my father's wishes. I chose to major in English literature instead of medicine. I craved good literature, and did not want to trade that for anatomy and biology.

After I graduated, I worked for China's Bureau of Seismology as an interpreter. Finally life became easy and comfortable. I had the best job a young woman could hope for. The pay was good, and I got to travel all over China to host banquets for foreign geologists at fancy restaurants and resorts. Yet my dream of going to the United States was still strong.

In 1986, I took another important exam for United States graduate schools. Just getting to the test site was a challenge. I had to take a night train to another city. It was around Chinese New Year, and the train was stuffed with people. The areas in front of the doors were crowded with travelers. No matter how hard I pushed, I could not get near to a door. When the conductor blew the whistle, in desperation I ran to one of the windows and threw my bag inside. Two men inside dragged me through the window. The train was packed tight and I stood up all night. I got to the test site the next morning, just in time.

At last my dream to come to America was realized.

The first time I went into a library in the United States I was overjoyed. I had never seen so many books that had beginnings and endings, and no missing pages. I read and read, and I was ecstatic when the librarian told me I could borrow the books for three weeks. I had never had a good book for that long before! And the food! There was so much. When I ordered ice cream, I couldn't finish

half of a serving. I thought I really was in heaven.

After I married and became a mother, I began a career that let me join my two passions—food and literature. As an author, practically everything I write has something to do with food: cookbooks, children's books, and magazine articles. Even in *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party* food is a metaphor for the changes occurring in Ling's life.

I feel blessed that I get to visit many schools and share my books and life with hundreds of students. But sometimes I am saddened by the poor state of many school libraries. One I recently visited had the library in a trailer, and the principal also had to serve as the librarian.

The obstacles that are before us every day of our lives often seem insurmountable. I hope that my book *Revolution* can inspire others to overcome their personal obstacles. I intend to do whatever I can to increase awareness of the importance of books and reading. If it were not for books, my dream would have never come true.

Ying Chang Compestine came to the United States for graduate school in 1986. After her parents passed away, she began her first novel, Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party (Holt, 2007), as a way of coping with her grief and to reconnect with China. Described as the "Anne Frank in the Cultural Revolution," Compestine draws from her childhood experience to bring hope and humor to this powerful story of a girl who comes of age and fights to survive during this dark period of Chinese history. It took her more than six years to perfect the book, which received a starred review from Publisher's Weekly. Compestine also has written cookbooks and children's picture books.