

A Curriculum Guide to

Little Green

by Chun Yu

About the Book

Little Green is the fascinating memoir of a young girl growing up during China's Cultural Revolution, which took place between the years 1966 and 1976. Written in free verse, this poetic text highlights the impact of Chairman Mao's policies on Little Green, her parents, grandparents, brother, and sister. Family life is disrupted when Little Green's father is sent to the countryside to be reeducated, where he now has to live and work with peasant farmers. Meanwhile, Little Green's mother is accused of having counterrevolutionary motives. Throughout these difficult ten years, Little Green experiences many changes, some of which she understands better than others. "Mama will explain things when you grow up," she is told.

Because the book is a mix of personal experience and historical information, it invites multiple reader responses. Readers will respond to the strong feelings among members of Little Green's family and their many acts of love for one another. Readers will also be able to envision past events because of the vivid descriptions of sights and sounds and the use of figurative language. In addition to evoking personal responses, the book also provides information about historical events. This information should prompt questions about these events: What happened? Why? What is important to know about these events?

Students can learn more about the Cultural Revolution in China by consulting the resources listed below. This list consists of additional memoirs, websites about the Cultural Revolution, and websites about the leader of the Revolution, Mao Zedong. In effect, *Little Green* opens the door to learning about how people's lives are impacted by the times in which they live.

Resources for Learning about the Cultural Revolution in China

Memoirs: These books provide individual perspectives on growing up during the Cultural Revolution.

- *Red Scarf Girl: a Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* by Ji-Li Jiang
- *Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution* by Moying Li
- *China's Son: Growing Up in the Cultural Revolution* by Da Chen
- *My Name Is Number 4: A True Story from the Cultural Revolution* by Ting-xing Ye

Websites about the Cultural Revolution: These sites provide additional information about the historical context of the Cultural Revolution.

- Cultural Revolution—Facts & Summary—History.com
www.history.com/topics/cultural-revolution
- What Was the Cultural Revolution?
<http://asianhistory.about.com/od/modernchina/f/What-Was-The-Cultural-Revolution.htm>
- The Cultural Revolution
http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/cultural_revolution.htm
- The Chinese Cultural Revolution <http://chinacr.weebly.com/key-dates-and-facts.html>
- On This Day—August 13, 1966: China Announces Cultural Revolution
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/13/newsid_4537000/4537605.stm

Websites about Mao Zedong: These sites focus on the life of Mao Zedong and the impact of his policies on the Chinese people.

- Bio.com: Mao Zedong’s biography and related videos at
<http://www.biography.com/people/mao-tse-tung-9398142#awesm=~oIjbXjVwhBsktG>
- Infoplease: Mao Zedong’s biography
<http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/mao-zedong.html>
- CNN.com: Flawed Icon of China’s Resurgence (Profile of Mao Zedong)
<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/inside.china/profiles/mao.tsetung/>
- Time Magazine Article : Mao Zedong
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988161,00.html>

Discussion Questions & Activities

Main Idea and Key Details

The Common Core State Standards suggest that students should be able to quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences (**RL.5–9.1**) (**RI.5–9.1**), be able to determine the main idea of a text and how it is supported by details, and be able to summarize effectively (**RL.5–9.2**) (**RI.5–9.2**). The activities below incorporate these skills by focusing attention on key ideas and supporting evidence.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the first verse titled “Beginning” we learn that in 1966, the year Little Green was born, “a revolution was in the making.” What changes took place in China during the Great Cultural Revolution that affected Little Green and her family? Find evidence throughout the book for changes in the following:
 - Attitude towards the countryside
 - Schooling

- Loyalty
 - Chairman Mao
 - Wealth
 - Family background
2. In the Epilogue to the book, we learn that the era of the Cultural Revolution is now referred to as the “Ten Years of Great Calamity.” What is a calamity? What evidence is there that the Cultural Revolution was a calamity? Follow these steps to investigate:
- Using a dictionary, investigate and discuss the meaning of *calamity*. Then fill in a vocabulary word map, using the format on the Reading Quest website at www.readingquest.org. [Click on “Strategies” and scroll down to Vocabulary Map and click on “print map v.2.”]
 - Fill in the web below by providing examples of events and policies that contributed to the Ten Years of Calamity. Share your thoughts with your classmates.

What was the event/policy?

How did it contribute to the calamity?

What was the event/policy?

How did it contribute to the calamity?

What Events or Policies Contributed to the Ten Years of Calamity? How?

What was the event/policy?

How did it contribute to the calamity?

What was the event/policy?

How did it contribute to the calamity?

3. In the verse “Political Classes for an Eight-Year-Old” we are reminded that Little Green did not understand everything she was required to do. Explain how her understanding of Chairman Mao’s theory was mistaken.
4. Select one of the poems to read aloud to your classmates. This poem should show the impact of the Cultural Revolution on Little Green. After reading the poem, explain why you chose it.
5. In the Epilogue, the author writes, “I want to give you this story, in hope that life is not wasted and the world will not live through the same suffering again and again.” What can we learn from this story that will help us live our lives today?

Craft and Structure: Reading and Writing Free Verse Memoirs

When reading and discussing *Little Green*, students learn about the craft and structure of free verse memoirs. The reading and writing activities below meet the following Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading literature:

(RL.5–9.4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. This includes being able to describe the use of figurative language and being able to show how language evokes a sense of time and place.

(RL.5–9.6) Describe how a narrator’s point of view influences how events are portrayed. Explain how an author can show different points of view in a narrative.

When writing free verse memoirs, students can apply their understanding of point-of-view and details that introduce a time and place. Students should be able to write a well-developed sequence of events and a conclusion that follows logically from the narrator’s experience. The activities below meet the following CCSS standards:

(W.5–9.3) Write narratives to develop real experiences or events using consistent point of view, descriptive details, clear event sequences, and a logical conclusion.

6. **Examining Free Verse Memoirs.** After reading and discussing the book, spend some time closely examining several verses. Make a chart of what you notice about the structure and style. What does the author do to make each verse interesting and understandable? Some features to consider are the following:
 - Title: How does the title reflect the content of the poem?
 - Point of view: Who is telling the story?
 - Word choices: Do the words appeal to the senses? Are similes and metaphors used? Are there interesting descriptions? Is repetition used? Give examples.
 - Remembered Conversations: Does the author recall what people said?
 - New insight: Does the verse end with a new insight into a situation?

Some suggested verses to closely examine are the following:

- “A Parade in the Middle of the Night”
- “On the Bridge to Mama’s School”
- “Walking on Thin Ice”

Invite students to select other verses to closely examine. For each verse, fill out a chart like the one below:

EXAMINING THE STRUCTURE AND STYLE OF “A PARADE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT”

As you examine the poem, tell what you notice about each of the features below. Give examples by using quotes from the poem. It’s possible that a verse does not have every feature.

I have included some notes about the poem to get you started:

<u>Feature</u>	<u>What I Notice</u>
Title	The title clearly reflects what the poem is about, even though the event Little Green describes is hardly what we would think of as a parade. In fact, the strangeness of “parading” up and down a single street in the middle of the night with no one watching is surprising.
Point of View	Even though it is Mama who did the parading, the information is given to us by Little Green. We don’t know all of Mama’s thoughts.
Word Choices	Interesting phrase: “My heart trembled and I woke up completely” Phrases that appeal to the sense of sight: “a flashlight shone through our window” “I could see shadows of hands holding and waving the Little Red Books.”
Remembered Conversations or Utterances	“Wake up! Show your respect to our Party and Chairman Mao!”
New Insight	“People all must be crazy then.”

7. **Writing a Free Verse Memory.** Think about an event in your life and write a free verse memory poem about it. Follow these steps:

- Brainstorm a few events you can write about. These can be family stories, school stories, big events in your life, or other important memories.
- Select one event and jot down what you remember about it.
- Tell your story from your point-of-view. Use descriptive language and interesting word choices. Consider including remembered conversation. Add a title that reflects the content of your memory.
- End with something meaningful—an insight into the event. Did you learn something new?
- Share your verse with your classmates.

8. **Writing from a Different Point of View.** Little Green is the narrator of each verse in the book, telling what she sees, hears, thinks, and understands. There are other points of view that could be used to narrate these events. Reread the verses below and discuss how a different narrator might see things differently. Then select one of these poems and write it from a different point of view:

Poem to Narrate	Point of View to Take When Narrating
“An Uncle Teacher Became a Counterrevolutionary”	Uncle Teacher
“A Parade in the Middle of the Night”	Mama
“On the Bridge to Mama’s School”	Rebellion Group Leader
“Baba Returns to Our Life”	Baba
“Learning from the Farmers”	Farmer

Here is an example of how Uncle Teacher might narrate his experience:

I made a mistake!
 So small, so minute,
 but with enormous consequences.
 I am loyal, dedicated, and trustworthy,
 but with one fatal switch
 I called a former leader
 “our comrade”
 instead of proclaiming,
 “Down with Liu Shao-Qi.”
 Even the stinging slap I gave myself
 cannot correct this misstep.
 Why is there no forgiveness?

9. **Writing and Illustrating a Narrative.** Draw a picture of one of Little Green’s most memorable experiences. Imagine that you were there to see what happened. Consider, for example, writing about when Little Green fell through the ice or when Little Green danced on her toes.

Then, in writing, describe what happened *before*, *during*, and *after* that picture. Give your narrative a title. When writing, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my title reflect what the narrative is about?
- Is the sequence of events clear?
- Have I described where and when the events happened?
- Have I used precise words and phrases? Interesting details?
- Is there a conclusion that follows from these events?

10. **Using Descriptive Language to Visualize a Setting.** As you read the verses, notice that words and phrases that appeal to your senses of sight, hearing, and smell help you to visualize the events taking place. Also look for similes—phrases that compare one thing to another.

Reread the poem “The Lotus Pond,” noticing how the language appeals to your senses:

- Sense of sight:
Midsummer in the country,
lotus bloomed in the pond.
Pink, white, and rosy flowers
standing among round green leaves
- Sense of smell:
The pond was full of scent,
floating through the air far beyond.
- Sense of hearing:
the chorus of cicadas
- Simile:
. . . big green leaves,
waving and reflecting colors on the water,
like beauties wearing jade in the wind

Read other poems such as “The River, Riverbank, and Graveyard” and “Snowy Night” to see how the author uses descriptive language. Then write about an important setting in your life, using descriptive language to help your readers visualize the setting.

Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration

The Common Core State Standards suggest that we provide time for students to engage in collaborative conversations that support comprehension. The activity below supports this standard:

(SL.5–8.1) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

11. **Partner Reading.** With a partner, share and discuss the verses in *Little Green*. Read each verse aloud or silently, and then stop to discuss it. Here are some suggestions to follow after reading a verse.

- Read-Pause-Discuss: After reading, each partner asks the other one question.
- Read-Pause-Summarize: After reading, take turns summarizing a verse.
- Read-Pause-Make Connections: After reading, make text-to-text, text-to-self, or text-to-world connections.
- Read-Pause-Sketch: After reading, each partner makes a sketch that summarizes the verse or highlights an important part.
- Read-Pause-Say Something: After reading, each partner makes a comment about the verse.

Extending the Experience: Finding Out about the Author

- Learn more about the author Chun Yu. Visit her website at <http://www.chunyu.org/>. Here you can find an interview with Chun Yu and pictures of her and her family.
- Watch a video of Chun Yu in which she discusses writing *Little Green* at <http://vimeo.com/11371637>
- Read an article entitled “Daughter of the Revolution” about Chun Yu and her writing at <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/03.02.05/yu-0509.html>

Additional *Little Green* Discussion Questions

Little Green is divided into six sections, each showing how the Cultural Revolution in China affected Little Green and her family over time. As you discuss each section, think about how the unfolding events changed her life and those of others.

The Beginning

1. This section describes how Little Green’s birth coincided with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Changes came quickly. Discuss the following changes:
 - a. How teachers were treated at Mama’s school.
 - b. Chairman Mao’s attitude towards city life and country life.
 - c. “Down with” practices

The Country

2. Little Green notices that even in the country, people’s lives are changing because of the Cultural Revolution. Discuss how each of these people’s lives were changed:
 - a. Mama
 - b. The children living at the school where Mama taught
 - c. Uncle Xie
 - d. Nainai, Little Green’s grandma
 - e. Baba, Little Green’s father
3. Several of the poems in this section describe the beauty of the countryside. (See, for example, “The River, Riverbank, and Graveyard”; “the Lotus Pond”; and “Snowy Night.” What words and phrases does the author use to help you visualize these places?
4. What does the confrontation between Mama and Comrade Li (“On the Bridge to Mama’s School”) show about Mama’s character?

The Country School Theater

5. How did the country school theater productions reflect the ideas of the Cultural Revolution?
6. How did the theater productions include the childlike thoughts and actions of Little Green and her brother Gege?

Nainai’s Stories and Other Stories

7. After rereading the story “Walking on Thin Ice,” discuss what happened to Little Green and how she was rescued.

8. Little Green's father said, "Life is like walking on thin ice." Do you agree?

City and School

9. Even though there were many efforts at school and in the city to pursue the goals of the Cultural Revolution, these efforts were not completely successful. Discuss how the policies listed below were not completely successful:
- Teaching Chairman Mao's political theory (See "Political Classes for an Eight-Year-Old")
 - Confiscating children's books from before the Cultural Revolution (See "A Story About the Forest")
 - Celebrating holidays in a new way (See "Qing Ming")
 - Learning from peasants (See "Learning from Farmers")

Why do you think these efforts weren't completely successful?

Between the Country and the City

10. How does Little Green feel when she hears about Chairman Mao's death?
11. What is important to remember about Little Green's experience growing up during the Cultural Revolution?
12. What questions do you have about the Cultural Revolution? Use these questions as the basis for further research.

Guide written by Myra Zarnowski, a professor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Queens College, CUNY.

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