

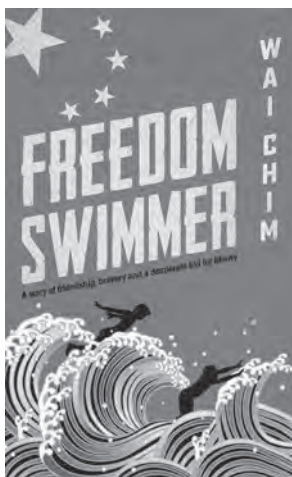
## Freedom Swimmer

BY WAI CHIM

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Reviewed by Clayton D. Brown



In the decades since the Cultural Revolution, there have been numerous valuable memoirs of that tumultuous period published in English, many of which combine coming-of-age stories with firsthand accounts of life as a young Red Guard. These include *Son of the Revolution* by Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang, *Blood Red Sunset* by Ma Bo, and *Red Scarf Girl* by Ji-li Jiang, to name but a few. Children's author Wai Chim contributes to this genre with a fresh and highly engaging story based on her father's harrowing experiences in—and daring escape

from—Communist China, all while exploring universal themes of love, friendship, and achieving a dream.

Set in a rural fishing village in coastal Guangdong Province, the story begins in the winter of 1962 when eleven-year-old Ming loses both of his parents to backward Communist policies. His father was shot to death by guards while trying to swim across the bay to freedom in the British colony of Hong Kong, a treasonous act that makes young Ming an ostracized pariah within the village but also serves as the inspiration for his own future escape. Ming's mother dies of starvation along with countless millions of others during Mao's ironically titled "Great Leap Forward." He is forced to leave her emaciated body at the riverside to be carried away by the swelling tide. We discover that a third of the village met this same end, which gives the river a reputation of being haunted. Throughout the story, water features as a source of both life and death, and of potential freedom but also lurking danger.

Living alone and destitute, the turn comes when an equally unfortunate girl named Fei, desperate to elude her abusive aunt, briefly hides in Ming's home. Before Fei is discovered and dragged home, the two share a preciously scarce sweet potato along with the hint of a future romance.

The story continues in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution, when Chairman Mao used teenage Red Guards to close schools and persecute teachers who were accused of bourgeoisie thinking. Ming now lives with other village orphan boys, and spends his days and even nights doing hard manual labor in the fields with everyone else. We meet a cast of characters that represent a broad spectrum of society. Cadre Feng constantly shouts political slogans and quotes Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*. Ming is worried because his best friend, Tian, flippantly mocks Communist dogma. An elderly villager—haunted by the memory of his children who starved during the Great Leap Forward—has a public mental breakdown. Bullies abuse their power and positions of authority, and Ming awkwardly pursues a relationship with Fei.

Ming's village is upended, as was the case throughout China, because of the "up to the mountains, and down to the villages" campaign. Partially to avoid anarchy in the cities, millions of former Red Guard youth were forcibly dispersed into the countryside. Ostensibly, they experienced rural exile to learn from the peasants, whom Mao romanticized, but this was the stopgap measure to end the chaotic and violent Cultural Revolution. When these outsiders arrive, Ming is initially intimidated by and jealous of Li, a sophisticated, handsome, and confident young man from the provincial capital of Guangzhou. But as the two get to know each other better and Li assists Ming in courting Fei, they find that despite their differences they are kindred spirits, and Ming reciprocates by teaching Li how to swim.

At this point in the story, the author introduces an interesting but effective narrative innovation. The book is written in first person throughout, but the latter half of the story alternates between the voices of Ming and Li. The author's technique lets the reader into the head of each boy and offers insights into the characters' substantially different perspectives on subsequent events. This approach to storytelling reveals their individual motivations for pursuing what becomes a joint escape plan.

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What we see through their eyes is how each boy loses all hope in the Communist system. While they have endured great difficulties up to this point, they become truly desperate. Ming discovers that Fei has been forced to marry a party official in another village and therefore loses any desire to stick around. Meanwhile, Li is coming under increasing suspicion due to the discovery of some contraband poems that he wrote with Ming. Even worse, Li's father back in Guangzhou is caught hiding counterrevolutionary writings and is condemned to a labor camp. As with Ming and his father's indiscretion, Li is presumed guilty merely by association. He is ostracized and his every move scrutinized. When Li's friends are caught helping his father, who has escaped from the labor camp, Li becomes the target of intense party "struggle," or self-criticism sessions, that escalate into regular beatings and constant verbal abuse.

As their future prospects dim, they lose hope. Ming finds himself ruminating on memories of his father talking about freedom during his childhood swim lessons. But it is Li who finally makes the bold proposal that the two hazard the escape to Hong Kong. Swimming, a shared respite from the political pressures and relentless agricultural work, becomes their shared path into a new life.

As if to remind us of the perils this will involve, the pair witnesses a drowning—whether by suicide or a failed attempt at escape is unclear, but far from dissuading them, the incident instead mirrors their own desperation. Ming comments that the drowned boy was more of a hero than those lionized in the party literature. The two friends, sneaking out under cover of darkness, brave sharks and patrol boats to make the arduous "freedom swim" across the bay and—in Ming's mind at least—finish what his father started.

What follows is a breathless account of that journey. The two become separated, and we discover later that Li had to turn back, ultimately returning to the village where he ends up marrying an erstwhile divorced Fei. An exhausted Ming makes it to Hong Kong, where he works in his uncle's factory for several years, but it is only after securing a visa to the United States he finally finds the freedom of his father's dreams. Chim was born in New York City, the beneficiary of her grandfather's vision and her father's tenacity, as acknowledged in her dedication and author's note.

The story offers an inspiring chronicle of endurance of every kind with a satisfying ending of hope rewarded, which resonates universally. But given that it is set in Mao's China, during two of the most impactful but generally underappreciated events of the twentieth century, it also is educational. While it is technically a work of historical fiction, the author draws from the lived experiences of her father and accurately captures what the Chinese people experienced during the tumultuous Mao years so that readers witness the terrible consequences of misguided policies on individual lives. Chim is an experienced storyteller, but in this case, she has clearly done the requisite homework to frame that story within the culture and politics of the era.

The narrative is expertly presented in accessible but lively prose pitched to young adult readers and featuring relatable young adult characters, which would work well in middle or high school history classes and even introductory college courses. The author provides adequate but minimal explanations of policies during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, so while the story certainly stands on its own, it could also make for an excellent entrée into classroom discussions or as a complement to textbooks.

Throughout the book, readers confront contrasts, most obviously between shy and awkward Ming and self-assured Li. Readers also confront differences in urban and rural life, pretenses of rebellion and the reality of enforced conformity, and serene scenes of swimming punctuated by jarring moments of violence and abuse. Readers are left with lessons that the greatest rewards often require real risks and the possibility of failure, but hope and the pursuit of dreams are essential. These universal truths should resonate with any reader, but are perhaps especially meaningful for young people.

Note that an audio version of the book exists, with an excellent narration by Telly Leung. ♦

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From:  
**“The Chinese Cultural Revolution:  
 Dynamic Times, Dramatic Lessons  
 for Today’s Kids”**

By Deborah Pellikan

China became Communist in 1949 when forces led by Mao Zedong defeated the Chinese Nationalists after a civil war that had lasted more than ten years. For the next twenty-seven years, Mao remained the supreme leader of China, despite serious economic problems and tragic errors in leadership. In 1966, Mao was on the defensive, fearing that opposition to his leadership was growing. He believed that certain people in the government wanted to replace him. To prevent this from happening, he declared a “Cultural Revolution.” This would complete the process of communizing the country by exposing those he termed “reactionary bourgeois authorities,” “capitalist roaders,” or “revisionists”—and by destroying all remnants of China’s pre-Communist past. Then, to create a revolutionary atmosphere and the upheaval it brings, Mao encouraged young people to organize themselves to carry out his policies.

For the first eighteen years of the People’s Republic of China, children were raised to revere Chairman Mao. He was their George Washington. In many ways, he was also considered their spiritual leader, guiding their society toward a Communist utopia. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1967, the political powers behind the movement tapped into this existing respect for Mao and encouraged fanaticism, which was especially powerful among the adolescents who would later be placed at the forefront of the Cultural Revolution

In August of 1966, the Red Guard units were authorized to set out to destroy the Four Olds (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) by raiding the homes and shops of members of the “backward” classes. These classes were often referred to as the black elements, and included former landlords, former merchants, former rich peasants, and persons perceived to be counterrevolutionaries, rightists, or criminals.

Music and other performing and visual arts were a major focus during the Destroy the Four Olds campaign and throughout the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao’s wife, who had been an actress during her younger years, used her influence to shape a new style of drama, music, dance, and visual arts that reflected the ideals of Maoist China and rejected traditional Chinese styles. All Western music was banned, since it was linked with “bourgeois capitalism.”

—EAA Editorial Office

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