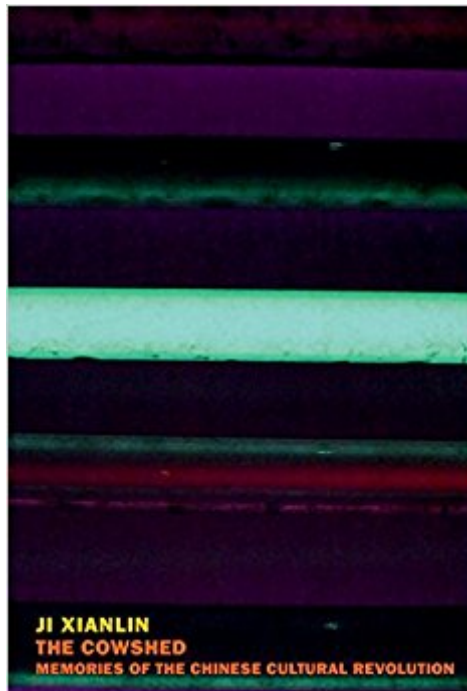




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# The Cowshed: Memories Of The Chinese Cultural Revolution



## Synopsis

The Chinese Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and led to a ten-year-long reign of Maoist terror throughout China, in which millions died or were sent to labor camps in the country or subjected to other forms of extreme discipline and humiliation. Ji Xianlin was one of them. *The Cowshed* is Ji's harrowing account of his imprisonment in 1968 on the campus of Peking University and his subsequent disillusionment with the cult of Mao. As the campus spirals into a political frenzy, Ji, a professor of Eastern languages, is persecuted by lecturers and students from his own department. His home is raided, his most treasured possessions are destroyed, and Ji himself must endure hours of humiliation at brutal "struggle sessions." He is forced to construct a cowshed (a makeshift prison for intellectuals who were labeled class enemies) in which he is then housed with other former colleagues. His eyewitness account of this excruciating experience is full of sharp irony, empathy, and remarkable insights into a central event in Chinese history. In contemporary China, the Cultural Revolution remains a delicate topic, little discussed, but if a Chinese citizen has read one book on the subject, it is likely to be Ji's memoir. When *The Cowshed* was published in China in 1998, it quickly became a bestseller. The Cultural Revolution had nearly disappeared from the collective memory. Prominent intellectuals rarely spoke openly about the revolution, and books on the subject were almost nonexistent. By the time of Ji's death in 2009, little had changed, and despite its popularity, *The Cowshed* remains one of the only testimonies of its kind. As Zha Jianying writes in the introduction, "The book has sold well and stayed in print. But authorities also quietly took steps to restrict public discussion of the memoir, as its subject continues to be treated as sensitive. The present English edition, skillfully translated by Chenxin Jiang, is hence a welcome, valuable addition to the small body of work in this genre. It makes an important contribution to our understanding of that period."

## Book Information

Hardcover: 216 pages

Publisher: New York Review Books; Main edition (January 26, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1590179269

ISBN-13: 978-1590179260

Product Dimensions: 6.3 x 0.7 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #503,859 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #155 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Asia > China](#) #1047 in [Books > History > Asia > China](#) #2639 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Political](#)

## Customer Reviews

"A searing first-person account of becoming the target of Red Guard fury. The most important Cultural Revolution document published in China in the 1990s, this harrowing, stylishly written book's English-language edition benefits from Chenxin Jiang's deft translation and Zha Jianying's superb introduction." —Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Financial Times

"At the center of Ji's account, ably translated by Chenxin Jiang, is the 'cowshed' of the title. [Ji's] description of this institution, really a kind of mini concentration camp, is unforgettable." —Richard Bernstein, The New York Times Book Review

"Offers a rare and harrowing description of life as a prisoner of the Red Guards...[with] a compelling introduction." —Jane Perlez, The New York Times

Sinosphere blog "Cowshed deserves to be near the top of anyone's list of literary memoirs of China under Maoist rule." —Philip F. Williams, World Literature Today

"China doesn't make it easy for its people to openly discuss sensitive issues. Some were surprised, then, when a professor at one of the country's most prestigious universities published this memoir in 1998 of his abuse during the decade-long, deadly social upheaval known as the Cultural Revolution. This book is a short, clear read, and now it's in English." —Cara Anna, Associated Press

"A bestseller in China, this memoir calls attention to the tremendous injustices wrought in that anarchic time. . . . [Ji's] pages seethe with grievance and reckoning. . . . [A] meaningful document of a time too little chronicled and now all but forgotten by younger Chinese people." —Kirkus Reviews

"Ji, as a world-renowned expert on Buddhism, Sanskrit, and comparative religions, brings a perspective to this hellish time that is marvelously informed, ironic, and revealing. Western readers get far more than simply an opportunity to be immersed in the sordid details of Red Guard torture. This book raises questions about religiosity, dictatorship, and trauma that will impact far beyond the China studies world. Chenxin Jiang's translation and notes elucidate with skill, and empathy, the difficult details of the text. . . . Here lies the opportunity of genuine testimony, as glimpsed so dramatically in the works of Primo Levi, Jean Améry, and Dori Laub." —Vera Schwarcz, Mansfield Freeman Professor of East Asian Studies, Wesleyan University

"The most detailed account of Mao-era violence ever published inside China, now available in English translation." —Perry Link,

Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages, University of California, Riverside  
“To a remarkable extent, The Cowshed achieved Ji’s goal of directing public attention to the brutality of the Cultural Revolution. And in light of current events such as artist Ai Weiwei’s house arrest and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo’s imprisonment, Ji Xianlin’s eyewitness story of surviving Reform through labor is an especially timely read.”  
•Jiang Chenxin

Ji Xianlin (1911–2009) was born in the impoverished flatlands of Shandong Province, only weeks before the Qing government was overthrown, and educated in Germany in the 1930s. After the Second World War, he returned to China to co-chair the Eastern Languages Department at Peking University. A distinguished scholar of Sanskrit and Pali, Ji was best known as an influential essayist and public intellectual. The former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao paid visits to the author during his final years and made it known that he considered Ji a mentor. Chenxin Jiang was born in Singapore and grew up in Hong Kong. Recent and forthcoming translations include a novel by Xiao Bai for HarperCollins and one by Zsuzsanna Gahse for Dalkey Archive Press. She received the 2011 Susan Sontag Prize for Translation, as well as a PEN Translation Grant for her work on Ji Xianlin. Chenxin also translates from Italian and German. She studied comparative literature and creative writing at Princeton University. Zha Jianying is a journalist and nonfiction writer. She is the author of two books in English, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* and *Tide Players: The Movers and Shakers of a Rising China*. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *Dushu*. She divides her time between Beijing and New York City.

Though I had read accounts of the Cultural Revolution while it was occurring, I really didn’t appreciate the disaster it was until the early 1980’s. One evening in Washington, DC, a long-time Chinese friend introduced me to a newly arrived Chinese “student,” one of the first allowed to study in the U.S. after normalization. This student was probably around sixty years of age and was simply a career academic. Over dinner, I somewhat casually mentioned the Cultural Revolution, but wasn’t prepared for the response. He immediately teared up and had difficulty talking, but I did learn that he and his family has suffered terribly, simply because he was a career academic. A couple years later, I had occasion to spend time with the son of a high ranking cadre and mayor of a major Chinese city who related to me how he and his wife had been banished to the countryside to herd sheep and be “reeducated” and how his wife had finally committed suicide by drinking pesticide.

Because of those, and other such incidents, I became aware that most in the West never really appreciated the sheer terror of the Cultural Revolution, simply because it's so unfathomable to the West. Ji Xianlin's "The Cowshed, Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution." vividly brings home the savagery of the ten years between 1966-1976. Ji was a peasant by birth who had been basically "given" to an uncle who ensured he would be educated. While having disdain for Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government, Ji was essentially apolitical. He was a true intellectual. For ten years he lived in Germany, away from his wife and family, during the period of World War II, where he marveled at the cult that developed around Adolph Hitler, assuming that could never happen in China. It was ironic though, that years later, Ji himself became part of the cult around Mao Zedong, attending the large rallies, shouting Mao's slogans and embracing the Communist cause, even becoming a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Then the Cultural Revolution erupted and the Red Guards (Hongweibing) began their terrible reign of terror, urged on by Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and member of the infamous Gang of Four, as well as Peking University professor, Nie Yuanzi, derisively referred to by Ji as the "Empress Dowager," in reference to a despicable character in Chinese history. Ji was initially (somewhat) supportive of the Cultural Revolution, but at one point, he was critical of Nie, resulting in his being targeted by her New Beida faction of the Red Guards. Ji even joined the Jinggangshan Red Guard faction as a means of protection against New Beida reprisals, but that failed. He was visited by Red Guards, priceless artifacts destroyed and his personal papers and past writings reviewed. This resulted in Ji being taken before large groups of students where he was beaten, spit upon and subjected to having to stand in the "airplane position." Later, he was assigned to The Cowshed on the campus of Peking University, but only after surviving harsh treatments on the countryside, etc. At one point, Ji was even prepared to commit suicide, but the Red Guards arrived to take him away for another session. Finally, Ji determined that he would survive the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution, a story of personal courage and perseverance. At times Ji interjected rather caustic humor in his observations, i.e. he noted that to his knowledge the airplane position had never been patented and how some students' calligraphy had actually improved by their writing the large posters where he and other intellectuals were denounced. But that humor does not take away from the vivid account of the savagery of his treatment from the Red Guards. Ji seemed to be at something of a loss as to how the Cultural Revolution occurred. But he did not discount the prospects of another Cultural Revolution occurring in the future, mainly because China's government has largely repressed any airing of that decade of Chinese history. Indeed, some may argue the current repressive government in China, where even the slightest hint of dissent is considered intolerable, there is a current Cultural Revolution ongoing,

though in a different form. This is a highly readable and important contribution to the history of the People's Republic of China and the repressiveness of the current government, that is neither the peoples or a republic, but instead, an intolerant police state.

Ji Xianlin may be a great man but this is not a great book. He was a Professor of Sanskrit in Beijing and this short book is an account of his grotesque suffering at the hands of the red guard during the Chinese cultural revolution. He backs the wrong faction in some opaque ideological struggle, is denounced, and is then repeatedly beaten, forced to work like an ox and "reeducated" by savage students and illiterate "workers." The cultural revolution ranks right up there with the Holocaust as a low point in modern human history but this book is lacking as an account of that horror.

Unfortunately the writing is stiff and stilted, perhaps in part because of the quality of translation, and the descriptions are never very clear. One does not come away with a clear picture of the author or of any other person and his account reads more like smuggled notes rather than a real book. Even after his suffering has ended he seems to have no real understanding of the evils of Mao or Chinese communism and the author continues to rely on the crutch of communist jargon to the end. Perhaps the cultural revolution will someday have a great literary chronicler, like say Primo Levi and the Holocaust or Solzhenitsyn and Soviet communism, but "The Cowshed" is more a source than a full picture.

Well written and reveals how sick minds work in a society brainwashed by the powerful. Everyone should read this to make sure it can't happen again...anywhere!

I enjoyed reading about the Cultural Revolution in China back in the 60's, written from the perspective of one of the intellectuals who was chosen for reform and re-education by the 'people'. I understand now why it took decades for China to recover and start moving forward again...

The book was an amazing account of one man's horrible and unbelievable experience during the cultural revolution.

Heartbreaking account of the vicious cruelty of Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Fully satisfied.

Good

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