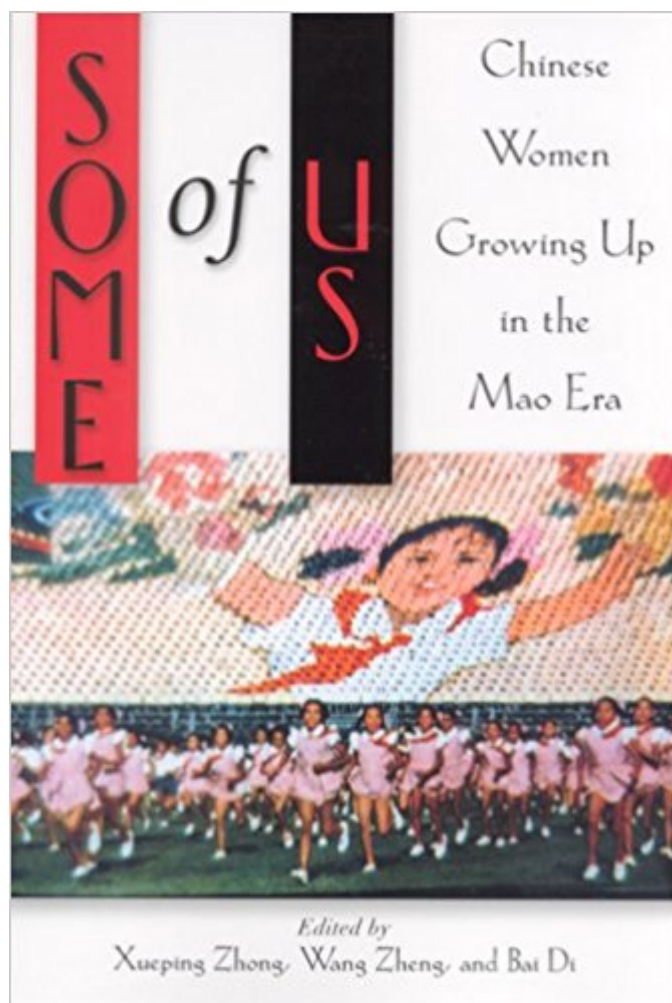


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# Some Of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up In The Mao Era



## Synopsis

What does it mean to have grown up female in the Mao era? How can the remembered details of everyday life help shed light upon those turbulent times? *Some of Us* is a collection of memoirs by nine Chinese women who grew up during the Mao era. All hail from urban backgrounds and all have obtained their Ph.D.s in the United States; thus, their memories are informed by intellectual training and insights that only distance can allow. Each of the chapters is arranged by the age of the author is crafted by a writer who reflects back to that time in a more nuanced manner than has been possible for Western observers. The authors attend to gender in a way that male writers have barely noticed and reflect on their lives in the United States. The issues explored here are as varied as these women's lives: The burgeoning rebellion of a young girl in northeast China. A girl's struggles to obtain for herself the education her parents inspired her to attain. An exploration of gender and identity as experienced by two sisters. *Some of Us* offers insight into a place and time when life was much more complex than Westerners have allowed. These eloquent writings shatter our stereotypes of persecution, repression, victims, and victimizers. Together, these multi-faceted memoirs offer the reader new perspectives as they daringly explore difficult and fascinating issues.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This collection makes a fascinating read. Each of the nine memoirs is crafted with skill and honesty.

- Dorothy Ko, professor of history, Bernard College

What does it mean to have grown up female in the Mao era? How can the remembered details of everyday life help shed light upon those turbulent times? *Some of Us* is a collection of memoirs by nine Chinese women who grew up during the Mao era and now live in the United States. Each of the chapters is crafted by a writer who reflects back to that time in a more nuanced manner than has been possible for Western observers. The authors attend to gender in a way that male writers have barely noticed; they also reflect on their lives in the United States. The issues explored here are as varied as these women's lives: The burgeoning rebellion of a young girl in northeast China. A girl's struggles to obtain for herself the education her parents inspired her to attain. An exploration of gender and identity as experienced by two sisters. *Some of Us* offers insight into a place and time when life was much more complex than Westerners have allowed. These eloquent writings shatter our stereotypes of persecution, repression, victims, and victimizers in Maoist China.

The American market has been flooded with memoirs from the Mao era that present this time, especially the Cultural Revolution years, as a purely dark, depraved, and tragic age with nothing but victims and victimizers, inhumanity, cruelty, and sexual repression. The editors of this volume, in their probing introductory essay, have no quarrel with these individuals representing their tragic experiences through memoirs, but do take issue with the assumption that many Westerners (and in some cases the authors of these other memoirs) take for granted, that is, that these victim/victimizer memoirs speak for all Chinese women who grew up in this era. The authors of these nine chapter length memoirs grew up in big cities in China during the Mao era, and all have gone on to PhDs and American professorships. While they note that this makes themselves unrepresentative in a sense, they are representative in that the vast majority of urban women were never victims or victimizers during the Cultural Revolution. These authors have both good and bad memories, were both harmed and empowered by the state's official ideology, and experienced personal growth. One of the authors mentions that American friends act almost disappointed when she tells them she has no personal horror story to share. The editors mention a revealing anecdote from an American academic conference in 1999 titled "Memory and Cultural Revolution". During the Q&A session, someone said that their memory of the period did not coincide with the panel's wholly gloomy and tragic view, rather they recalled a high and youthful spirit, and that they were neither victim nor victimizer. The chair of the panel condescendingly dismissed this by saying that some Holocaust survivors are nostalgic for their camp days too. Thus, no more time needed to be wasted on such invalid memories, and the panel moved on with their discussion of politically correct memory. These authors simply want to add their experiences, and their astute and balanced analysis into the mix. All

nine memoirs are high quality and raise our understanding of what it was like for an average girl/young woman in urban China in the 1960s-70s, and they raise important philosophical and sociological questions about gender. Many are moving while always avoiding pretentiousness. Moments of humor are common. Horror story memoirs are sadly true, but the other reality is people laughed, children played, parents and children argued and bonded, adults gossiped, youth aspired, friendships formed, people worked, students studied (usually), performers performed, farmers farmed, and ordinary people lived their lives. These memoirs, being full of rich, colorful details of family and neighborhood life, increase our knowledge of Chinese culture as well as the Cultural Revolution. Here is a brief description of each memoir.

Naihua Zhang -- "In a World Together Yet Apart: Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies" -- tells a moving story of life long bonds formed with 2 rural young women after being sent to the countryside.

Wang Zheng -- "Call Me 'Qingnian' But Not 'Funu': A Maoist Youth in Retrospect" -- shares details of her happy childhood during the CR, then applies her scholarly expertise (women's studies) to her own life coming of age as a young woman in a time of empowering feminist ideology, yet continuing influence of older cultural assumptions about gender.

Xiaomei Chen -- "From 'Lighthouse' to the Northeast Wilderness: Growing Up Among the Ordinary Stars" -- was the daughter of two elite theatre stars who were persecuted during the CR. She nevertheless had a "happy, even exhilarating childhood, though I was not spared growing pains", including a sent-down experience where she got to understand ordinary people in the countryside via work as a reporter.

Bai Di -- "My Wandering Years in the Cultural Revolution: The Interplay of Political Discourse and Personal Articulation" -- Bai, who is from Harbin in northern China, discusses, among other things, how the CR impacted the parent-child dynamics of households in her neighborhood.

Jiang Jin -- "Times Have Changed, Men and Women are the Same" -- was the daughter of Shanghai intellectuals, a red guard, a sent down youth, a university student, and now a historian in the US. Inspired by her parents, especially her liberated mother, and using their private library of classics, she aimed to "read 10,000 books, travel 10,000 miles [for true knowledge]", a Chinese expression.

Lihua Wang -- "Gender Consciousness in My Teen Years" -- discusses her evolving perceptions and consciousness as a female worker (and later college student) who ultimately realizes her aspiration of being an educated independent person who contributes to society while finding self-fulfillment.

Xueping Zhong -- "Between 'Lixiang' and Childhood Dreams: Back from the Future to the Nearly Forgotten Yesteryears" -- from Shanghai, whose parents instilled in her a love of learning early on; her mother pushing her to model herself after great intellectuals in history, like the author of *Dream of the Red Mansion*, Cao Xueqin. She followed the CR trend of rebellion in her own way, studying hard for college while

others were not. She is interested in the conflict and harmony between lixiang [ideals] and personal aspirations. Zhang Zhen -- "Production of Senses in and out of the 'Everlasting Auspicious Lane': Shanghai 1966-1976" -- a Cinema Studies scholar at NYU today, discusses her unique neighborhood, her childhood love of films and literature, her amateur performance experiences, and intellectual maturation. Yanmei Wei -- "'Congratulations, It's a Girl!' Gender and Identity in Mao's China" -- the only one of these memoirs of someone who grew up mostly in the post-Mao era, which makes for a point of comparison with the others. Expectations of female behavior had evolved, but with some continuities too.

This was a fascinating book - but had the exact opposite effect on me as I think was intended. Young women having grown up in the Mao era telling their own personal stories (horrible things) with little to no affect. It made them seem almost "brain-washed". And I think they were trying to say that things weren't so bad. I found it quite sad, but very fascinating.

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