



# Curriculum Connections

## *Girls on the Line*

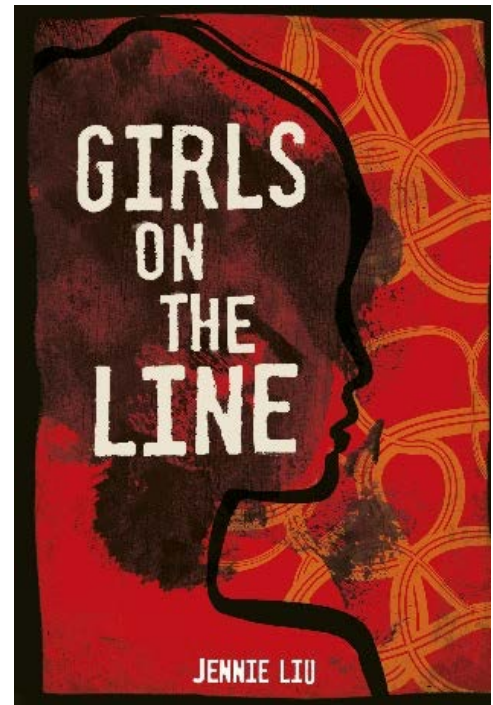
By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

My initial reading of Jennie Liu's 2018 novel *Girls on the Line* reminded me of an older nonfiction work titled *Factory Girls* (Spiegel & Grau, 2008) by *Wall Street Journal* writer Leslie Chang in that both deal with the plight of young women moving from the Chinese countryside to the city for work in China's emerging high tech manufacturing sector of the early twenty-first century. While Liu's novel shares some overlapping themes with Leslie Chang's nonfiction, Liu takes her novel a step further, including other important topics like Chinese demographics, gender imbalances, the *hukou* system 户口 (a system of household registration used in mainland China; pronounced: "WHO-cow"), and human trafficking - all critical topics in a study of contemporary China. *Girls on the Line* is both readable and accessible for students in grades 7-12 while also exposing students to a range of critical social studies topics. The novel also connects to literary themes in coming-of-age literature such as the maturing of the characters through arduous struggles.



The book best fits into courses in **Global Studies**, **Human Geography**, and **Modern World History** and could be read and studied in grades 7-12, but with the caveat that this novel contains mature topics like human trafficking. The novel could also be situated in a literature course that explored other stories about the friendships among two women, like Sula and Nel in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, or the theme of sisterhood found in classics such as *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Luli and Yun, both orphans, find a family in one another. However, if this book is read in a middle school **humanities** class or **world literature** class, I think it will require even more study of the social and political issues that are central to the novel. I also hope that this book will be read and recommended by school librarians. Below are a few specific suggestions for teaching with this novel and connecting its themes to common curricular topics.

To learn more about the Freeman Book Awards, please visit:

[www.nctasia.org/freeman-book-awards/](http://www.nctasia.org/freeman-book-awards/)



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For teaching commodity chains and factory life around the world, pair this novel with *The True Cost*, a 2015 documentary by director Andrew Morgan about “fast fashion,” and related articles about factory life in the Global South. At the beginning of the novel, a guard says: “Busy time for making the foreigners’ things” (pg. 2). To explore the global context in which Luli and Yun work at “making the foreigners’ things,” present *The True Cost* with the following supplemental articles: Jim Yardly’s article “Report on Deadly Factory Collapse in Bangladesh Finds Widespread Blame” from *The New York Times* (May 22, 2013), “In Praise of Cheap Labor” by Paul Krugman in *Slate* (March 21, 1997), and “Don’t Blame the Brands” by Jagdish Bhagwati in *Prospect* magazine (April 2, 2013). These articles provide additional information and alternative points of view to the film *The True Cost*. These four sources help to establish the contemporary context in which Luli and Yun go to work. Leslie Chang’s *Factory Girls* maintains that factory work in China is a complex topic that involves both dangerous working conditions and significant economic opportunity and empowerment for both the workers and their families in the villages who are often the recipients of remittances.

For middle school or high school **United States History** courses a curricular entry point could be a comparison between Chinese factory workers in the early twenty-first century, represented by Luli and Yun, and the experience of the Lowell Mill Girls in early nineteenth century America. For example, supplement this lesson with the videos “A Day in the Boarding House” from Lowell National Historical Park website or a YouTube video titled “Lowell: The Continuing Revolution.” Comparisons like this will help students recognize patterns and related contexts in world history. As I have taught about China’s special economic zones and their factories, I try to help students understand that China in the early twenty-first century is undergoing an economic transformation that shares some parallels to the West in earlier centuries. In other words, giving students points of comparison within American or European history helps them construct a more complex understanding of these issues in both the Western and East Asian contexts.

The **AP Comparative Government** course includes references to the *hukou* system in its study of the Chinese government. *Girls on the Line* highlights how important the *hukou* system is to movement and access to social services. In the novel, Yun says of



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*hukou*: “it makes you an official person” (pg. 42). While a course in **Comparative Government** considers *hukou* from a political or social point of view, Jennie Liu’s novel unpacks the personal implications of those left out of the *hukou* system.

The **AP Human Geography** curriculum includes units on the geography of migration. *Girls on the Line* can supplement discussions of the causes of migration like push and pull factors. In the context of this migration unit, I have often asked students to complete a research project on their own family’s migration story, presented as a five-minute video. What were the push and pull factors that led to their ancestors’ migration? There are also many films about Chinese migration. A popular and longer documentary film is *Last Train Home* (directed by Lixin Fan, 2009) which reports on the annual movement of 130 million migrant factory workers traveling to their rural homes for Lunar New Year. However, for a shorter account of this story, consider Pearl River Productions film *Away from Ping Wei* (2011) which also tells the story of a young factory worker who travels from Beijing to visit her family in the village of Ping Wei for Lunar New Year. These documentaries put real faces and voices on the migrant experiences described in *Girls on the Line*. Any one film or novel presents one story, and that story is limited. If each book, article, or film is supplemented by additional sources we can create complexity of understanding for students.

In addition to migration, **AP Human Geography** also includes a unit on global population and demographic transition that includes lessons on family planning and demographic transition. I typically begin looking at countries with naturally growing populations and declining populations. The NOVA documentary titled *World in the Balance: The People Paradox* (2004) is an excellent source for teaching the demographic transition model. In **Human Geography**, China is often presented as an example of government intervention in population growth - namely, the One Child Policy. Like the earlier discussion of the *hukou* system, *Girls on the Line* further personalizes the One Child Policy and its demographic implications for a generation of Chinese. In addition to the ban on second children that was not lifted until January 1, 2016, there is also a significant fine for single mothers. In the novel, Yun says, “Even if



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I wanted to keep [the baby], there's no way I could work and take care of a baby. And if I'm not working, I'll never pay off the Family Planning fines" (pg. 158).

Another book that presents some of China's demographic changes is *China's Millennials* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) by Eric Fish. While I would not recommend the full book for all readers in grades 7-12, some chapters may be read by older students. More importantly, this is an excellent resource for teachers to better understand the Chinese generation that is emerging in the current workforce and later into leadership.

Students who enjoyed reading *Girls on the Line* may want to begin following China Watchers on Twitter:

@niubi  
@chubailiang  
@joshchin  
@emilyzfeng  
@BeijingPalmer  
@suilee  
@BethanyAllenEbr  
@YuanfenYang  
@shenlulushen  
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As well as through other Sites and Podcasts:

ChinaFile	<a href="http://www.chinafile.com/">http://www.chinafile.com/</a>
SupChina	<a href="https://supchina.com/">https://supchina.com/</a>
South China Morning Post	<a href="https://www.scmp.com/">https://www.scmp.com/</a>
China Digital Times	<a href="https://chinadigitaltimes.net/">https://chinadigitaltimes.net/</a>
New York Times China	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/topic/destination/china">https://www.nytimes.com/topic/destination/china</a>
Financial Times China stream	<a href="https://www.ft.com/stream/8b82f4f1-6fdf-4fe1-91db-99cac1802016">https://www.ft.com/stream/8b82f4f1-6fdf-4fe1-91db-99cac1802016</a>
NPR China stream	<a href="https://www.npr.org/tags/127994355/china">https://www.npr.org/tags/127994355/china</a>
Sinocism newsletter	<a href="https://sinocism.com/">https://sinocism.com/</a>
ChinaSmack	<a href="https://www.chinasmack.com/">https://www.chinasmack.com/</a>
Sinica Podcast	<a href="https://supchina.com/series/sinica/">https://supchina.com/series/sinica/</a>

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### Suggested Readings and Resources

- Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1869.
- Bhagwati, Jagdish. "Don't Blame the Brands." *Prospect*, April 2, 2013.
- Chang, Leslie T. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008.
- Fan, Lixin, dir. *Last Train Home*. 2009; Zeitgeist Films. DVD.
- Fish, Eric. *China's Millennials: The Want Generation*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015
- Fone, Andrew, prod. *Away from Ping Wei*. 2011; Centerville, MA: Pearl River Productions. [http://www.pearlriver.tv/portfolio\\_page/away-from-ping-wei/](http://www.pearlriver.tv/portfolio_page/away-from-ping-wei/)
- Krugman, Paul. "In Praise of Cheap Labor." *Slate*, March 21, 1997.
- LowellNPS. "Lowell the Continuing Revolution." YouTube. Video, 19:03. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdVU85zBZXE>
- Lowell National Historical Park/Tsongas Industrial History Center. "A Day in the Boarding House." YouTube. Video, 1:34. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Xbo9IC\\_PY4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Xbo9IC_PY4)
- Morgan, Andrew, dir. *The True Cost*. 2015; Life is My Movie Entertainment. <https://truecostmovie.com>
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.
- Yardley, Jim. "Report on Deadly Factory Collapse in Bangladesh Finds Widespread Blame." *New York Times*, May 22, 2013.