

# ***Bend, Not Break***

By Ping Fu

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Reviewed by:

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*Bend, Not Break* is a compelling autobiography by Chinese American entrepreneur, Ping Fu. The book details her ability to find the strength to survive and overcome during the tumultuous Chinese Cultural Revolution period. Fu details her forced deportation and role in the technological advances that led to the successful creation of her software company.

The book chronicles how Fu's once happy and safe childhood with her affluent and educated family in Shanghai turns into a world of uncertainty and poverty due to the Cultural Revolution. Under the leadership of pro-labor, anti-intellectual Chairman Mao, China experiences a Communist Party reform to eliminate capitalists and intellectual influencers. Mao's regimen is enforced by an out-of-control army of young people called the Red Guards. At the age of eight, Red Guards storm Fu's house and take her from her Shanghai family. The guards inform Fu that her Shanghai Mama and Papa are not her birth parents, and she is forced onto a train to her birth city, Nanjing, where she will raise her little sister, Hong.

Fu struggled to comprehend the chaos that took place in her life and the oppression experienced throughout the People's Republic of China. She and hundreds of children from educated families were identified as "black elements" and were punished for the greed and corruption of their parents and ancestors. The Red Guards were considered to be superior and possess good blood because they have been peasants and soldiers and held other labor-intensive positions. In China, the favorite color was red, signifying happiness, while black was considered evil and a sign of death. Red Guards fed black element families 'bitter meals' consisting of dirt, animal dung, tree trunks, yellow mold from trees, and any other items they could find on the ground. These meals were considered payback for the hunger and poverty Red Guard families suffered while black element families ate delicious meals and lived in comfortable homes.

Chairman Mao believed education should be governed and that all citizens raised by intellectualist or educated families must be reformed. Each day, the children had study sessions in which they would recite slogans from Mao's Little Red Book. Study sessions consisted of people walking on stage to the jeers and chants from the crowd to criticize or denounce their ancestors, professors, administrators, and anything associated with black elements. Fu was forced to wear a chalkboard around her neck, outlining her family's crimes, while holding her arms outstretched in the airplane position. She was punched and slapped by Red Guards until they were satisfied with the sincerity of the admission of her crimes. Because of these repeated public humiliation sessions, Fu began to believe what she was saying and no longer craved love and affection from her Shanghai Mama.

From the age of 10 to 18, Fu served as a factory worker and farmer in rice fields. She worked six days a week for six hours a day, with two hour breaks for study sessions to learn Mao's teachings. While working in the factory and on the farm, Fu realized she had developed friendships with the factory workers and farmers. During her time in the dormitory, she had been afraid to develop friendships, but she realized her factory and farm co-workers, some Red Guard descendants, were her support system, and they genuinely cared about her well-being.

Immediately after the death of Chairman Mao and the arrest of high-ranking officials on accounts of treason, universities were re-opened. Fu was assigned, by the government, to study

literature at Suzhou University. For her senior thesis, Fu chose to write about China's one child policy. The thesis was shared with the Chinese press, then China's national paper. The content and interviews served as evidence of China's violation of human rights and resulted in backlash from the United Nations, ultimately bringing shame to China and forcing Fu's deportation to the United States.

Fu was admitted to the University of New Mexico to study English as a second language and enrolled as a full-time graduate student. She eventually moved to San Diego to pursue an undergraduate computer science degree and work as a computer programmer. Upon graduating she accepted a job in Illinois. In her role as a computer scientist, Fu collaborated with various professors, classmates, and co-workers to make several cutting-edge advances in the scientific community including working with genomes and quantum mechanics. During this time, Fu married a former graduate professor.

With the financial support of Hong and her husband, Fu was able to develop Geomagic, a 3D software company. Former classmates and professors provided vital input and remain involved with the company as employees or board members. During its first few years, the company experienced several trials, including near bankruptcy, changes in leadership, employee layoffs, and lawsuits. Through it all, Fu learned to appreciate the power of humankind, the importance of communication, and loving what she did.

*Bend, Not Break* is a story of trials and triumphs. Fu's experiences during the Cultural Revolution and moving forward to her entrepreneurship provide several relevant themes for the new student reader. The first theme focuses on developing independence. Although Fu's experience with independence was at a young age and was forced due to the Cultural Revolution, she adhered to the rules, raised her younger sister, and learned how to survive within a challenging environment. New students transitioning to college life and establishing independence may experience moments of uncertainty and are able to find commonalities and affirmation through Fu's stories of survival.

A second theme found throughout *Bend, Not Break* was the importance of values. Often times, Fu would have to draw strength from the values learned growing up with her Shanghai family. After being gang-raped by a group of teenage boys, Fu had no adult family or support system to help as she recovered from her physical and mental injuries. It was during this time she reflected on the Taoist teachings her Shanghai Papa made her memorize—to be like the bamboo tree, bend from prevailing wind, but never break.

A third theme highlighted in the book was the importance of humankind. Various acts of humanity were shown to Fu and Hong throughout their stay at the Nanjing University dormitory. It was during their most destitute moments that Fu and Hong would receive help through a difficult situation or return to their rooms to find warm buns and stir fried greens after forcing down bitter meals from the Red Guards. As Fu worked to start Geomagic, she continued to experience acts of humanity from employees that chose to believe in her dream and help the company succeed during economic uncertainty. New environments require incoming students to find and develop relationships with campus resources and peers that will provide opportunities to give and receive support. Discussion of the humanity shown throughout the book can be related to the available support systems found within university faculty and staff.

Another theme found throughout *Bend, Not Break* was the importance of family. Fu valued the happy memories and loving relationship she created during her childhood with her Shanghai family. Her relationship with her Nanjing birth parents did not flourish until she was older and could appreciate and accept their expressions of love. Fu recounts the painful reunion and troubled relationship with her Nanjing Mother during the Cultural Revolution period. Fu developed a close relationship with her Uncle W, who would sneak her books from Western Society, such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Gone with the Wind*. During these visits, Fu engaged in intellectual conversations and

questioned the Chinese political and economic system. New students bring familial values, morals, and cultural experiences that shape their identity. *Bend, Not Break* demonstrates the importance of self-assessment and learning how to incorporate old and new values as students educate themselves and self-identify with various sub-populations.

*Bend, Not Break* differs from a true chronological autobiography by grouping reflections and memories around a centralized chapter theme. In a chapter entitled, “Blood Is Thicker Than Water,” Fu discusses her excitement surrounding her pregnancy and being homesick to visit China and her family. As she visits China, Fu sees the vast economic developments and was flooded with childhood memories of a poverty-stricken China. She returns to present times and shares the story of the birth of her daughter, Xixi. The chapter ends as Fu discusses becoming an entrepreneur—a career she told her father she would never pursue. Each story was a separate experience, linked by the theme of blood being thicker than water. This themed grouping breaks the monotony of reading a chronological story of the author’s life, but may confuse students as they are processing the happenings of a particular time period.

Overall, *Bend, Not Break* is an inspiring book that reminds the reader of life’s challenges and the triumph that comes through perseverance, humanity, and a will to succeed. New student readers are able to identify with Fu’s experiences such as family values, acts of humanity, developing independence, and an overarching realization that we must bend like the bamboo, but never break.