

The art of writing:  
how does thien use  
historical events,  
themes, and literary  
de...

[Parts of the World, Asia](#)



Thien dives into China's history and culture in her novel, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, making it worthy of studying in both literature and history courses. Thien's book centers on two family lines and although they seem separated geographically, their history links them together. In China, Big Mother Knife is the wife of Ba Lute, sister of Swirl, aunt of Zhuli, mother of Sparrow, Da Shan, and Flying Bear, and grandmother of Ai-ming; however, in Canada, Jiang Kai and Ma are the parents of Marie, who is on a mission to uncover the truth about the history of her family. Thien allows the theme of family to take center stage as she uses Marie's ignorance of her family's past as a vehicle to bring light to China's historical events. Thien uses each historical event, for instance, the land reform campaign and the Tiananmen demonstrations as well as literary devices such as foreshadowing and symbols to show how families were divided both philosophically and geographically. Thien's book begins with foreshadowing as Marie tells the reader her father had died while going back to China. This prompts the reader to look for answers just as Marie is doing. Her family has been divided geographically, but the reason is not clear. Further in the book, in the heart of Mao Zedong's China, family members were forced to prioritize themselves over their loved ones in order to avoid punishments by the Red Guards. For instance, "Da Shan and Flying Bear had been forced to criticize Zhuli, Swirl, and Wen the Dreamer" (Thien 256) on posters. Ba Lute even gave them the idea to describe her as "the daughter of a rightist filth" (Thien 256) and justified the action by saying "it's nothing, only words" (Thien 256) and that "if you don't denounce Zhuli, they'll only make it worse for her" (Thien 256). If Zhuli's family did not criticize her, the Red Guards would insist that she is

an enemy and it would put her family members at risk of being killed or sent to re-education facilities. Families are generally seen as a source of unconditional protection for its members family, but through these historical events, the reader can see how the family unit is affected. During the revolution, each individual must look after themselves or risk being killed or sent to re-education faculties across China. For instance, Wen the Dreamer was considered a “ dangerous element” (Thien 97) after his hidden cellar was discovered to possess “ books from America” (Thien 97) as well as the “ Book of Songs and the Book of History” (Thien 97). As a consequence, he was given “ re-education through hard labour” (Thien 98) and his wife was labeled a “ convicted rightist and shameless bourgeois element” (Thien 98), which means she must endure the same punishment. Therefore, they were separated from their daughter, Zhuli, and not able to protect her in times of need. Families similar to this were torn apart during many instances in China’s past. Therefore, protection comes in different forms during troubled times. In one instance, while Wu Bei was being humiliated, Zhuli stood by herself and “ held her violin tightly in her arms” (Thien 241). Zhuli was “ motionless” (Thien 241) and undeniably scared and alone, so she could only count on her violin, the object that gave her comfort. In Thien’s novel, this violin does not only symbolize Chinese culture and music, but also is a symbol of protection when she has no one. These historical events that changed and ended the lives of a multitude of people in China allowed Thien to convey such themes and use literary devices in her novel.

**The Characters: Which character do you most connect with? Why? How does this character evolve throughout the novel?**

Thien has introduced characters with such intricate roles and pasts throughout the book, but at the beginning, I connected with Marie because we view Chinese through a similar lens. Since I have taken the language since sixth grade, we shared the common characteristics of only being fluent in English and going through the process of learning Chinese. Marie insisted that while she initially was learning the Chinese language, she viewed it as a “ puzzle” (Thien 5), “ a game,” (Thien 5) and “ a pleasure” (Thien 5). I was first drawn to Chinese because every character was a puzzle or picture that could be easily seen and pieced together with radicals and strokes. I began my study starting with the simplest character, 人, which means man/person. It has two strokes, and, for me, it was a game to see how adding this character to other strokes produced different meanings. Now, we part ways in the fact that Marie stopped going to her calligraphy lessons and I will continue my studies here at Georgetown as it provides a sense of comfort for me. We, however, will always connect on how we started with the language.

Furthermore, I have always felt unaware of my family’s past and I could only hang on to my memories and the minimal information I had been given. Like me, Marie is a character that has often been left in the dark with only “ fractional” (Thien 3) and “ inaccurate” (Thien 3) details of memories she has of her own father. She is not aware of his past in China and had never been told the story of the Book of Records. I empathized with her because I had to wait until my great aunt drew up a family tree for me and explained how everyone was related to understand my family’s past. I feel everyone has a

right to know their past and history. Like me, Marie had to wait for someone, in her case, Ai-ming, to come along and tell the history. Once she was given the full story, Marie changed. In the beginning, Marie was a child ignorant of her ancestral story, but throughout the book, she learns the importance of history being recorded. Marie realizes that she must “ know the times in which we are alive” (Thien 419) and believes that records should be kept and then let go so that they can be added by the next generation. Marie becomes a fuller person with the integration of her history. Even her outlook on her father has been altered as she struggles less with blaming him for leaving. From a person not knowing the Book of Records to someone insisting that we must “ have faith that, one day, someone else will keep the record” (Thien 419), she has evolved. Like her, my parents have to have faith that my brother and

I will tell the history of our family.

**The Structure: Describe the structure Thien uses in the book. Why this structure? What are the pros and cons of using it?**

Thien’s structure is seemingly random as the storyline switches time periods suddenly and the order of chapters are not organized in the conventional 1, 2, 3... structure. Since Thien writes the story about two connected families, two storylines are created, one in the present in Canada and one in the past in China. From the beginning of the book to the end of Part One, Marie is learning about her father and her family’s ancestral past partly by Ai-ming recounting “ the story of the Book of Records” (Thien 53). In Part One, the time period shifts to current Canada when Ma invites Ai-ming into their home

and then helps her get to America and past China as Marie learns about her father's relationship with Ai-ming's father. Thien may have chosen this structure since the reader ends up learning about Marie's family lineage as she learns about it herself. It allows the reader a chance to connect with Marie as he/she may recall a time of hearing his/her own family history from a loved one. In addition, Thien incorporates Mandarin characters into the book, so the reader gets a glimpse of Chinese history, culture, and language. Since Marie is in Canada and is only fluent in English, she cannot read the Book of Records herself. Therefore, the reader is further connected to Marie as they both improve their Chinese simultaneously. However, in Part Zero, the story dives into the past of characters such as Sparrow and Big Mother Knife and ends with the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Therefore, the chapters are ordered from 7 down in this section.