

Do Not Say We Have Nothing



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MADELEINE THIEN

Madeleine Thein was born in British Columbia to a Hong Kong Chinese mother and a Malaysian father. Before dedicating herself to creative writing, she studied contemporary dance in college. She then went on to earn a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. She claims to have felt she was not talented enough to pursue writing as a career at a younger age. Still, in 1999 Thien won the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop's Emerging Writers Award for her short story collection, *Simple Recipes*. Her debut collection treats the themes of intercultural relationships and intergenerational dynamics within families, both of which occur as themes in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. She published *Certainty*, her first novel, in 2006, which is about her father's experience growing up in Japanese-occupied Malaysia. From 2010 to 2015, she taught in the Creative Writing department at City University of Hong Kong. When she left, she published an essay about Hong Kong's restrictions on freedom of speech and the abrupt dissolution of the creative writing program. *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is her most successful novel to date, and it was published in 2016 to widespread critical acclaim. Thien is partnered to the Lebanese Canadian writer Rawi Hage and teaches creative writing at Brooklyn College.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* centers on exploring the effects that China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s had on individuals and communities. Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Communist Party of China, launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 in order to purge what remained of capitalist values and traditional practices in Chinese culture. He encouraged young people to rebel against authority figures—not including himself—and in doing so incited China's youth into a violent class struggle. Many youth joined Red Guard groups across the country, and in these groups they targeted alleged “rightists,” torturing, publicly humiliating, and sometimes killing them. Many more so-called rightists were sent to re-education hard labor camps, where conditions were brutal and many more died. It is estimated that tens of millions of people died during the Cultural Revolution. Officially, the Cultural Revolution ended in 1969, but the aftermath continued until 1971, when the leader of the People's Liberation Army fled the country.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Dai Sijie's [Balzac and the Little](#)

[Chinese Seamstress](#) tells the story of the Chinese Cultural Revolution from the perspectives of young artists. Like several characters in Thien's novel, the protagonists of [Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress](#) are sent to re-education camps during the Cultural Revolution. The main characters are two young men who are talented storytellers, who entertain fellow members of the hard labor camp by telling stories every evening. Many of their tales are influenced by Western literature, and when the official in charge of the camp finds out, he punishes them. This moment in the plot ties into a broader theme in Thien's work: many of her characters are punished or socially excluded because they enjoy various Western artistic traditions. Both Thien and Sijie seem to argue that it is acceptable and even desirable for Chinese people to be able to integrate Western thought and aesthetic into their lives. This belief, however, goes directly against the Cultural Revolution's policies. Another thematically similar work is *By Night in Chile* by Roberto Bolaño. Bolaño's novella—his English-language debut—is about an author who, on his deathbed, defends the dictator Pinochet's regime in Chile, although, as a young man, he opposed the dictatorship. The novella is obviously satirical, and through his criticism of his own narrator's complicity with the oppressive government, Bolaño highlights the importance of art's role as a form of political resistance and criticism. He emphasizes that artists must defend their freedom of speech rather than simply comply with the government in order to avoid censorship or punishment. This is similar to Thien's message: in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, the main characters resist their oppressive government by continuing to exercise freedom of speech and creating music and art. *Certainty*, another novel by Thien, is about a young, Asian-Canadian woman trying to trace her father's traumatic past as a child growing up in war-torn Malaysia. Similar to Li-ling in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, *Certainty's* protagonist is the child of Chinese migrants in Canada who dedicates much of her time and energy to understanding the stories of the generation that came before her. *Certainty* also explores themes of storytelling: the main character is a radio documentarian and tries to apply her journalistic skills to uncovering her father's story. Finally, Thien directly references [Notes from Underground](#) in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*—the plant and flower clinic where Swirl and Wen the Dreamer finally meet after years of separation is named *Notes from the Underground*. Thien's use of this particular Dostoevsky novel augments the theme of isolation and loneliness. It is significant that *Notes from the Underground*, in Thien's novel, serves as the location where two of the main characters end their period of isolation from one another. This strikes a contrast with the theme of Dostoevsky's text, which charts the psychological decline of the protagonist as he

becomes increasingly isolated within his own mind. Both novels highlight the dangers and the pain of living in isolation. Finally, Thien has stated in interviews that *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is one of her favorite novels, and its influence on *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is clear. Both novels paint thorough, nuanced portraits of families by sharing the perspectives of family members across generations.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Do Not Say We Have Nothing
- **When Written:** 2016
- **Where Written:** Vancouver, Canada
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Vancouver, Canada, early 2000s; Shanghai, China, 1960s and 1970s
- **Climax:** The Tiananmen Square riots
- **Antagonist:** The Communist government in China
- **Point of View:** First-Person Singular and Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Major Prizewinner. *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* won several prizes: the Governor General's Award for English-language fiction, the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and the Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards for Fiction.

A Book with a Playlist. Thien curated "Book Note," a playlist that includes the musical artists that influenced her while she was writing the novel, including Sinn Sisamouth, J.S. Bach, and Ros Sereysothea.



PLOT SUMMARY

Now an adult, Li-ling reflects on when she was only 10 years old and her father, Jiang Kai, commits suicide. While he was alive, Li-ling knew her father as a quiet, withdrawn man but after his death discovers that in China, he was a renowned pianist. He leaves her and her mother alone in cold Canada, and, after his death, her mother becomes obsessed with looking through the many documents he left behind. One day, Li-ling's mother receives a long letter from China. It is from Ling, a family friend and the wife of Kai's former **music** teacher, who requests that Li-ling's mother host her daughter, Ai-ming, who is in Canada and has nowhere to go. Ai-ming is 19, and she was involved in the Tiananmen Square riots in China, which is why she needs to seek political refuge in Canada. Ai-ming stays with Li-ling and her mother for three months, and she and Li-

ling become very close. One day, Ai-ming discovers in the pile of documents under the dining table **The Book of Records**, a piece of writing passed down through her family for generations. Ai-ming begins to read the book to Li-ling. In it, they read the stories of Big Mother Knife and Swirl, two sisters who, during the Chinese Civil War, are young women who make their living by singing and performing in different towns across the countryside. Swirl sings so beautifully that she is wooed by Wen the Dreamer, the youngest child of a wealthy family of landowners in rural China. Wen woos Swirl, in fact, by sending her chapters of *The Book of Records*, which is a captivating novel about two lovers who lose touch with each other after the Communist Revolution. The book ends in the middle of a chapter, though, and Wen and Swirl finally meet in person when they are both at a bookstore—owned by Ling's aunt, the Old Cat—looking for the next chapter of *The Book of Records*. Meanwhile, Big Mother Knife, once the war ends, returns to her husband, Ba Lute, who fought in the Communist resistance and has returned a revolutionary hero. Although she ideologically disagrees with Ba Lute on many things—she doesn't have as much faith in Communism as he does—Big Mother Knife has three sons with her husband: Sparrow, Da Shan, and Flying Bear. Back in Canada, outside of *The Book of Records*, it is time for Ai-ming to try to cross over to the United States: there, she has heard that she can get asylum as a Chinese student. Li-ling's mother makes the drive with Ai-ming one day to the border, and sees Ai-ming onto the bus to San Francisco.

Back in Vancouver, Li-ling continues reading *The Book of Records*. She learns that Swirl and Wen the Dreamer suffer greatly under Land Reform: Wen's family has always been wealthy in his village and, because of this, the people publicly humiliate and execute some member of Wen's family in the name of Land Reform. Wen and Swirl are sent to live with their young daughter, Zhuli, in a hut on the outskirts of town. Kicked out of the village school, Zhuli spends her days wandering, and one day goes down a trapdoor in her family's old property. There, she discovers a hidden library full of books and musical instruments. She discovers her love of music. But one day, a neighborhood kid sees her going through the trapdoor, and the other villagers soon discover the hiding place. They punish Wen the Dreamer and Swirl for having hidden stashes of wealth from the village by sending them to re-education camps in the Northwest region of the country. Zhuli, only six years old, is sent to live with her aunt, Big Mother Knife, and her family in Shanghai. There, Zhuli has the opportunity to hone her love for music. She plays violin very well and becomes a student at the Shanghai Conservatory, where Sparrow, her cousin, is a teacher, and He Luting is the program director, infamous for continuing to teach Western composers even though the government deems them counter-revolutionary.

After suffering for many years at the re-education camp and

almost dying of starvation, Swirl is released and moves to Shanghai to live with Big Mother Knife and her family. One day, Sparrow opens the door to an impoverished boy who hands him a mysterious letter. It is from Wen the Dreamer, in which he sends his greetings to Zhuli and Swirl but does not reveal his location.

Meanwhile at the Conservatory, Zhuli, Sparrow, and a student named Jiang Kai form a group of friends. Kai is romantically involved with Zhuli and Sparrow; neither knows that the other has this kind of intimacy with their mutual friend. Kai is the son of poor, rural revolutionaries who died during the famine that immediately followed the Communist Revolution. Because of his “exemplary class background,” Kai is popular among the students of the Conservatory. In spite of his revolutionary background, Kai is involved with underground, counter-culture groups. One day, he takes Sparrow and Zhuli to an underground meeting where a group, led by Old Cat, reads books that have been deemed counter-revolutionary. Soon, Kai and Sparrow receive the opportunity to travel to rural China to collect folk songs to play with the conservatory. Before he left, Ba Lute had asked Sparrow to meet up with a former fellow Communist revolutionary, Comrade Glass Eye, who he thinks might know something about Wen the Dreamer’s whereabouts. Kai and Sparrow are able to meet Comrade Glass Eye on their trip, and from him learn that Wen the Dreamer has escaped the re-education camps and is wandering through China, using stolen identity cards to get by.

When they return from the trip, Swirl learns that her husband is free, and she decides to go and look for Wen. She diligently copies chapters of *The Book of Records*, altering the language such that they encode the location of *Notes from the Underground*, a plant and flower clinic run by Swirl’s friend, Lady Dostoevsky, who saved her from starvation at the re-education camps. She and Big Mother Knife decide they will distribute these chapters throughout the Northwest of the country, in the hopes that Wen will find a copy and know to meet Swirl at the plant and flower clinic.

Meanwhile, the Cultural Revolution is underway, and Kai becomes part of the Red Guard—a student militia—almost by default, due to his revolutionary background. He persecutes the students at the Conservatory who have been labelled rightists or the children of rightists, including Zhuli, whose parents have been labelled anti-revolutionaries. One day, a mob of students tries to attack her as she leaves the Conservatory, but she is able to escape thanks to the help of Tofu Liu, one of her classmates whose parents have also been labelled rightists. Still, in spite of Tofu’s help, Zhuli is targeted again by her classmates, who show up at her house to bring her to the Conservatory, where they torture her. Kai is present and denounces Zhuli for playing Western music. After this day, Zhuli imagines that her peers could one day break her hands while torturing her. She is so afraid of living without being able

to play the violin that she commits suicide in the Conservatory. Sparrow finds her body and brings it home. He runs into Ling in the street on the way, and she comforts him, walking with him. When he arrives at home, he sees that Ba Lute has encouraged his Da Shan and Flying Bear to denounce Zhuli, for fear that the whole family will be persecuted by the Red Guards. Da Shan and Flying Bear seem to really believe the propaganda that Ba Lute has forced them to write as a performance: they tell Sparrow that Zhuli must be guilty if she killed herself. For years, Big Mother Knife will keep Zhuli’s suicide a secret from Swirl and Wen the Dreamer, who have escaped China across the Mongolia border and communicate with her via letter. Big Mother Knife lies that Zhuli is a successful musician.

In Canada, the adult Li-ling has lost her mother to cancer. As an adult, she has dedicated her life to the study of mathematics and become a professor. Still, she longs to discover what happened with her family: why her father committed suicide, and where Ai-ming has gone. Since going to the United States, Ai-ming has sent letters and called occasionally, but in recent years, Li-ling has heard nothing. Li-ling’s curiosity about her family’s past leads her to China. There, she requests the police file on her father’s death, and, when she learns where the apartment is that Kai committed suicide, she goes to visit it, though she can’t bring herself to physically enter the building.

After Zhuli’s death, Sparrow is sent to work in a factory producing **radios** in the South. He no longer plays music. There, he marries Ling and they have a daughter named Ai-ming. One day at his factory, Sparrow’s faction of workers is called to watch something on television: it is a televised questioning of He Luting, who has been captured by Red Guards and is being interrogated for being a rightist. However, He Luting denies all of the allegations against him and shames the Red Guards—many of whom are his former students—for lying. In the middle of the questioning, the screening stops. A few years later, Kai pays Sparrow a visit. Kai is now playing with a professional orchestra and gifts Sparrow with tickets to see him play, as well as a record player. Sparrow has given up on playing music, but after he sees Kai perform, he feels inspired to begin composing again. When she is older, Ai-ming dreams of studying computer science at Beijing University, and she studies hard for the entrance exams. She doesn’t pass on her first try, but Sparrow commits to relocating to Beijing so that she has a better shot. Once in Beijing, Ai-ming meets Yiwen, her neighbor and a university student. Yiwen gets Ai-ming involved in the Tiananmen Square riots, which are sweeping the city. Ai-ming and Yiwen regularly sleep in Tiananmen Square, protesting for freedom of speech. Even Sparrow gets involved, joining a battalion with his workforce. When one of Sparrow’s coworkers is injured during the army’s invasion of Beijing, he goes into the streets to help the coworker and is killed by soldiers. After the army invades the city, the Tiananmen Square riots are over, and Ling learns that if Ai-ming is to study in

Beijing University, she will need to pass a “political background check.” Knowing that Ai-ming’s involvement in the Tiananmen Square riots will render her unfit to study at Beijing University, Ling arranges for Ai-ming to go and live with Li-ling and her family in Canada—since Sparrow and Kai were so close, she knows that Li-ling’s mother will do her this favor. She sends Ai-ming to meet up with Swirl and Wen the Dreamer, who live as nomads in the desert. They help her cross the border to Mongolia, and set her up with someone who will help her get on a plane to Canada.

Li-ling travels to Shanghai in 2016 to try to piece together remnants of her family’s past. She meets Tofu Liu, who plays a recording of Kai playing the piano for her. He also connects her with Yiwen, with whom she makes several copies of *The Book of Records*. She includes hints about her own location and leaves copies online and in major Beijing cities, hoping that Ai-ming will find the book and get into contact with her.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marie / Jiang Li-ling – The narrator of the book, Li-ling is Kai’s daughter who is born in Canada. Distraught and lonely after her father’s suicide, 10-year-old Li-ling welcomes the arrival of Ai-ming in her life when Ai-ming comes to stay with Li-ling and Li-ling’s mother in Canada, seeking refuge from political persecution in China. Ai-ming is the daughter of Kai’s old friends Sparrow and Ling, and Ai-ming and Li-ling soon become as close as sisters. Ai-ming reads to Li-ling from *The Book of Records*, a mysterious document that her father left behind after his suicide that contains many secrets of their families’ interconnected history. When Ai-ming leaves Canada after three months of living there, Li-ling is sad and lonely. She rarely hears from Ai-ming and, eventually, doesn’t hear from her at all. As an adult, Li-ling loses her mother to cancer when she is in her mid-twenties. Lonely, she immerses herself in her studies. She gets a PhD in mathematics and she goes on to become a university professor. Still, try as she might, she isn’t able to avoid her feeling of unease surrounding her loneliness and family history. When Li-ling is in her thirties, she embarks on a journey to try to discover what happened to Ai-ming after she lost contact with her, and to learn more about why her father committed suicide. Through studying *The Book of Records* and traveling to Hong Kong and Shanghai to meet with people who knew Ai-ming and Kai, Li-ling takes steps to unravel her family mystery—but she isn’t able to fully resolve anything. She never makes contact with Ai-ming, but she decides, as many of her ancestors did, to make copies of *The Book of Records* in which she hints at her own location, so that Ai-ming might one day find them and discover how to meet up with Li-ling.

Ai-ming – Sparrow and Ling’s daughter. Ai-ming grows up alone

with her father and her grandmother, Big Mother Knife, in the south of China. From the time Ai-Ming is a little girl, she dreams of studying computer science at Beijing University. The first time she takes the entrance exams, she doesn’t pass, which makes her so depressed that Sparrow requests a work transfer to Beijing—if they move there, Ai-ming will have a better chance at entering the university. When they move, Ai-ming befriends the neighbor, Yiwen, a university student who is deeply involved in the student protest movement. Yiwen introduces Ai-ming to the world of the protests, and soon, Ai-ming is heavily involved in the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square. Eventually, the military commits massacre against the protestors in which Sparrow is killed as he tries to help his coworkers. After this, Ling learns that her daughter will be subject to political background checks before she is allowed to enter university. This causes Ling to think that it’s best for her daughter to leave the country for Canada, where Sparrow and Ling’s old friend Kai lives. Ling sends Ai-ming to meet up with Swirl and Wen the Dreamer, Sparrow’s aunt and uncle, who live in the desert in Western China. They help Ai-Ming cross out of the country, and from there, Ai-ming goes to live with Li-ling (Kai’s daughter) and Li-ling’s mother in Canada before trying to get asylum in the United States. While in Canada, Ai-ming becomes very close with Li-ling, often reading to her from *The Book of Records*, an old document of Kai’s which contains details about both the girls’ family histories. After staying three months in Canada, Ai-ming crosses into the United States, where she lives first in San Francisco and then in New York. However, she never gets legal immigration status and she returns to China in 1996 for her mother’s funeral. After this, Li-ling loses touch with Ai-ming, and Li-she never finds out what becomes of Ai-ming despite traveling to Shanghai in an effort to locate her.

Zhuli – Sparrow’s cousin and Swirl and Wen the Dreamer’s daughter. Born into Wen the Dreamer’s wealthy family, Zhuli only enjoys her family’s prosperity for a few short years before they lose everything in the Land Reform during the Chinese Civil War. As a six-year-old, Zhuli watches her great uncle, Da Ge, be murdered on a stage before the entire village, and her mother and father publicly humiliated. Once Zhuli’s family has been sent to live in a hut on the outskirts of town, Zhuli is kicked out of the village school. She is so bored that she explores the village by herself, and one she day stumbles upon her father’s family’s hidden library. Inside, she discovers many musical instruments, which leads her to develop a love for music. However, when a village child sees Zhuli going into the secret library, he reports it, and Zhuli’s parents are sent to re-education camps. One of Zhuli’s neighbors takes her to live with her aunt, Big Mother Knife, and her family in Shanghai. There, Zhuli further explores her love of music, becoming a celebrated violinist at the Shanghai Conservatory where Sparrow teaches. She plays successfully and she especially enjoys working on Sparrow’s original compositions. When the

Cultural Revolution starts, Zhuli is targeted by her classmates for being the daughter of “convicted rightists.” She is tortured. One day, it occurs to her that her classmates might break her hands as a form of punishment. The thought of living without music is so terrifying to her that she decides to commit suicide. Through her suicide, Zhuli demonstrates her extreme dedication to music: she wishes to give her whole life over to it, and the thought of not being able to have that freedom causes her to imagine that life is not worth living.

Jiang Kai – Li-ling’s father and Sparrow’s friend. As a child, Jiang Kai lives in a village that is severely impacted by the famines immediately following the Communist Revolution. He loses his whole family before going to study music at the Shanghai Conservatory. When he arrives there, his “exemplary class background” earns him praise from his peers and teachers. What’s more, he is a very talented piano player. Kai develops romantic relationships with both Sparrow (his teacher) and Zhuli (his fellow student). When the Cultural Revolution gets underway, however, Kai is a member of the Red Guard—coming from a revolutionary background, this happens almost automatically—and he attacks many students and professors from the Conservatory. Although Kai verbally attacks Zhuli while she is being tortured by Red Guards for being the daughter of a convicted rightist, he spares Sparrow the agony of being tortured by the violent student militia. After the riots at the Shanghai Conservatory are over, Kai accepts a position to play with the orchestra in Beijing, going on to become a successful musician. However, he eventually chooses to leave China and go to Canada, where he marries Li-ling’s mother and the couple has Li-ling. However, once in Canada, Kai becomes severely depressed and dependent on alcohol and other drugs, likely because he feels guilty about the violence he committed as a Red Guard. He tries to meet up with Sparrow in Hong Kong the year of the Tiananmen Square riots, but Sparrow is killed before he arrives. The next year, Kai commits suicide by jumping from a building in Shanghai.

Sparrow – Ai-ming’s father and Big Mother Knife and Ba Lute’s son. As a young man, Sparrow is an accomplished musician who teaches at the Shanghai Conservatory. Sparrow eats, sleeps, and breaths music and he is constantly either listening to one of his favorite classical pieces or writing his own compositions. He is close with his cousin Zhuli, who lives with him and his family, and he has a subtly romantic relationship with his student Jiang Kai. Until the Cultural Revolution, Sparrow dedicates his entire life to music. While many of his contemporaries choose to title their pieces propagandistically, with words like “liberation” and “revolution” in the title, Sparrow only titles his compositions with numbers. However, once the Cultural Revolution hits, Sparrow’s family is targeted in the political uprising. After being tortured and humiliated by the Red Guards, Zhuli commits suicide by hanging herself in Sparrow’s office. Upon finding his cousin’s body, Sparrow is devastated. He is comforted by his

friend and fellow student, Ling, and the two eventually have a romantic relationship. Soon, the Shanghai Conservatory is shut down, and Sparrow is sent to work in a **radio** factory in the south of China. Sparrow could have accepted an offer to play with the orchestra in Beijing but he refuses—he doesn’t believe in Chairman Mao or the policies of the government, and refusal for him is an act of resistance, demonstrating his commitment to his principles. For Sparrow, music transcends politics, but under Mao’s regime, music must have a clear political message. So, choosing not to play music, Sparrow instead dedicates his life to working in the factory. He eventually marries Ling, and when their daughter, Ai-ming, is born, Sparrow becomes her primary caretaker after Ling is transferred to Beijing. As an adult, Sparrow is subdued and quiet, making him a mystery to his young daughter. It is only when the two of them have relocated to Beijing, and the Tiananmen Square protests begin, that Sparrow begins to show his personality again. He begins writing music, a composition called *The Sun Shines on the People’s Square*, and he becomes actively involved in the demonstrations. Ultimately, Sparrow’s kindness leads to his death: he goes out to help a coworker who has been injured during the Tiananmen Square massacre and he is subsequently shot by soldiers.

Big Mother Knife – Sparrow, Flying Bear, and Da Shan’s mother; Ba Lute’s wife; and Swirl’s sister. Big Mother Knife is born during the Chinese Civil War and she grows up performing as a singer to have enough to eat. She imparts to her children the importance of a good song, saying that as long as a musician faithfully remembers the words to a song and performs well, the people will never forget the musician. Big Mother Knife is known by everyone for her fierce character and fighting spirit. Indeed, when Swirl and her husband, Wen the Dreamer, are in trouble during the Land Reform—they are punished by the people of their village for being part of the bourgeois—Big Mother Knife arranges for their daughter, Zhuli, to come and live with her in Shanghai. On one visit to Swirl, Big Mother Knife also agrees to sneak into the secret bunker that exists underneath Wen the Dreamer’s house to get *The Book of Records* from the hidden library. It is thanks to Big Mother Knife, then, that the characters from the younger generation, like Ai-ming and Li-ling, have access to *The Book of Records*. When Sparrow is sent to work in Southern China, Big Mother Knife requests a transfer to the same region so that she can live with him and Ai-ming, her granddaughter. Because Ai-ming’s mother, Ling, is stationed in Beijing, Ai-ming treats Big Mother Knife as a mother figure. Big Mother Knife reads Ai-ming *The Book of Records* when she is a child.

Swirl – Big Mother Knife’s sister, Wen the Dreamer’s wife, and Zhuli’s mother. Like Big Mother Knife, Swirl grows up traveling and performing during the war. She has a beautiful voice, and her singing helps her and her community deal with the atrocities of the violence that surrounds them. One day, Swirl is

performing in a teahouse when Wen the Dreamer sees her for the first time. Smitten, he begins sending her chapters of *The Book of Records* to woo her. She devours the chapters as soon as they arrive, but one day, they run out. Desperate to know the ending, she looks everywhere for a copy of the book. When she looks at the Old Cat's bookstore, she finally meets Wen, who is also searching for the rest of the book. The two are soon married. Swirl goes to live in Wen's family home. During Land Reform, they are publicly humiliated in front of the whole village and they are sent to live in a hut on the outskirts of town. Later, Swirl and Wen are convicted as rightists and they are sent to re-education camps. Swirl almost starves to death during her time at the hard labor camp in the Northwest, but her friend, Lady Dostoevsky, saves her from the famine. When Swirl is released from the camp, she goes to live with her sister in Shanghai but she still has the habit of trying to steal portions of food, for fear of going hungry again. When the Cultural Revolution begins, Swirl and Big Mother Knife go in search of Wen and they meet up with him at Notes from the Underground, Lady Dostoevsky's plant and flower clinic. Swirl and Wen spend the rest of their days wandering the deserts of Western China and they eventually help Ai-ming, Big Mother Knife's granddaughter, travel to Canada to escape political persecution.

Wen the Dreamer – Swirl's husband and Zhuli's father. Born into a wealthy, rural family, Wen the Dreamer never went hungry, even when other members of his village starved. Although his mother hoped he would grow up to become a successful landlord, from a young age he demonstrated more interest in books than in business. Wen constantly writes poetry, and when he discovers *The Book of Records*, he dedicates himself to copying it. He sends Swirl chapters of the book to woo her, and once they are married, he continues looking for the missing chapters of the book. When Wen's family is tortured and publicly humiliated during Land Reform, he is soon sent to a re-education camp in the Northwest. There, he faces starvation but he is able to steal food from the camp directors in order to survive. He eventually escapes the camp and spends many years wandering the desert, avoiding capture by the Chinese government. One day, he finds a copy of *The Book of Records* that Swirl had copied, encoding the location of Lady Dostoevsky's plant and flower clinic, Notes from the Underground, inside the book. He meets Swirl there and he spends the rest of his days wandering the desert with her.

Ling – Ai-ming's mother. As a young woman, Ling studies philosophy at Beijing University and she forms part of an underground study group that resists Chairman Mao's regime. This is where she meets Sparrow, her future husband, for the first time—but the two are separated for a long time during the Cultural Revolution. Eventually, Kai, one of Ling's childhood friends and Sparrow's student from the Conservatory, pulls strings in Beijing to get Ling and Sparrow placed in the same

city through their work. Soon after Ai-ming is born, Ling's job at a **radio** station sends her back to Beijing, and she lives most of her life in isolation from her family. When Sparrow and Ai-ming move to Beijing so that Ai-ming can study at Beijing University, Ling is grateful to have her family all living together. But their days as a family are numbered: soon, the political protests in Beijing culminate in a military massacre of thousands of people in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, in which Sparrow is shot and killed. Although Ai-ming gives up on looking for Sparrow's body three weeks after the massacre, Ling keeps looking. Eventually, she realizes that Ai-ming has no future in China and she writes to Li-ling's mother, asking them to provide a home for Ai-ming in Canada.

Ba Lute – Sparrow, Flying Bear, and Da Shan's father and Big Mother Knife's husband. At the beginning of the Communist Revolution, Ba Lute is a proud revolutionary. He returns from the Civil War a hero, full of deeply-held Communist sentiments. Ba Lute and Big Mother Knife are a mismatched couple: Big Mother Knife is cynical where Ba Lute unhesitatingly believes in the Party. However, when the Cultural Revolution starts, Ba Lute is targeted by the Red Guards for his connection to Big Mother Knife's family—particularly, Swirl and Wen the Dreamer, who are convicted rightists. What's more, Ba Lute is a musician, which is seen as a bourgeois profession during the Cultural Revolution. Ba Lute is tortured by the Red Guards but he still doesn't lose faith in the Party. He instructs his sons, Da Shan and Flying Bear, to write denunciations of Zhuli, his niece, once she has committed suicide after being tortured by Red Guards herself. He believes that publicly displaying these denunciations will protect his family, but it doesn't—Ba Lute himself is sent to a re-education camp, where he goes so far as to write to Chairman Mao, certain that there has been a mistake. When he tells this to his wife, she laughs at him for having so much faith in the Communist Party.

Old Cat – Ling's aunt and the owner of a bookstore. The Old Cat hosts regular meetings for people who resist the Communist regime and who want to read books that Chairman Mao has tried to forbid. Kai frequents these meetings and he brings Sparrow and Zhuli along with him. The Old Cat is also the one whose shop Swirl frequents when Wen the Dreamer stops sending her chapters of *The Book of Record*, and Swirl is hoping to find the copies elsewhere. The Old Cat lives until she is over 100 years old.

He Luting – The director of the Shanghai Conservatory when Sparrow is a teacher there. He Luting is stubborn and obstinate, dedicated to playing Western music that he thinks is of high quality even when the government criticizes him for not playing music that is "revolutionary" enough. During the Cultural Revolution, He Luting is captured, tortured, and publicly humiliated by Red Guards, which Sparrow sees on television. Members of the Red Guard—former students of the Shanghai Conservatory—accuse He Luting of committing

various crimes against the Communist Party and of teaching his students Western trash. Contrary to what everyone expects, He Luting refuses to confess, demonstrating his strength of spirit and commitment to doing what's right.

Da Shan – One of Sparrow's younger brothers. During the Cultural Revolution, Da Shan is sent to live with one of his mother's family members in a different province. There, to compensate for his family's image as a group of rightists, he leads the attacks on local teachers and students thought to be counterrevolutionaries. Da Shan joins the army as an adult and he is placed in Tibet. He denounces his family and he never sees them again.

Li-ling's mother – Li-ling's mother and Kai's wife. She dies of cancer while her daughter is still in her twenties. After her husband's suicide, she becomes obsessed with going through the paperwork he left behind—this is how Li-ling first discovers the book of records. When Ling writes to Li-ling's mother asking for her to support Ai-ming in Canada, Li-ling's mother agrees. She supports Ai-ming financially for as long as she can and she helps her to cross over into the United States.

Yiwen – Ai-ming's first real friend and a student at Beijing Normal University during the Tiananmen Square riots. Yiwen is a dedicated member of the student protests and she does many things that Ai-ming, raised in the countryside, thinks are very "Western" and "modern." Yiwen listens to a Walkman (Ai-ming assumes that listening to private music breeds private thoughts) and she always wears a pink dress with a matching pink headband. Her willingness to wear clothes that mark her as different, even vain, demonstrates her dedication to fighting against the contemporary Communist value system that doesn't allow her to express her individuality. Yiwen is the one who gets Ai-ming involved in the Tiananmen Square riots.

Lady Dostoevsky – Swirl's friend from the re-education camps. Lady Dostoevsky is a prominent translator of Fyodor Dostoevsky's literary works and she is sent to the re-education camps for her love of Western culture. There, during the famine, she saves Swirl's life by stealing food from the camp directors and feeding it to her. Once they are released, Lady Dostoevsky's plant and flower clinic, *Notes from the Underground* (a reference to Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from the Underground*), is the meeting place where Swirl reunites with Wen the Dreamer, her husband, who also was taken to re-education camps.

Tofu Liu – Zhuli's friend and fellow music student at the Conservatory. Also the child of "counterrevolutionaries," Tofu identifies with Zhuli's fear at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and the two of them decide to practice a Western composition together. At one point, Tofu rescues Zhuli from being attacked by a mob of violent students. Also during this time, Zhuli's friend and fellow student Kai (now a member of the Red Guard) leads a raid on Tofu's home. Decades later,

when Li-ling is in Shanghai looking for evidence of her friend Ai-ming, who has disappeared, she meets up with Tofu Liu. Tofu survived the Cultural Revolution and he is able to give Li-ling information about Kai, Li-ling's father. He also connects her to Yiwen, a friend of Ai-ming's. At the end of the novel, Tofu plays an old piano composition of Sparrow's for a small audience including Li-ling, Yiwen and her daughter, and the Old Cat (Ai-ming's great-aunt).

Comrade Glass Eye – A friend of Ba Lute's from his days as a Communist Revolutionary. When Sparrow has the chance to travel to the countryside to collect folk songs for the Shanghai Conservatory, Ba Lute tells him to try to meet up with Comrade Glass Eye, who may know where Wen the Dreamer—Sparrow's missing uncle—is. Indeed, Comrade Glass Eye was at re-education camp with Wen the Dreamer but he doesn't know where Wen went after that. Comrade Glass Eye himself was released, and Wen the Dreamer told him he planned to escape.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Flying Bear – One of Sparrow's younger brothers. During the Cultural Revolution, he denounces Zhuli, thinking that since she killed herself, she must be guilty of being a rightist—which is what the Red Guards accused her of. Eventually, Flying Bear joins the People's Liberation Army and he denounces his whole family.

Da Ge – Wen the Dreamer's uncle and a wealthy property owner in the village. During the Land Reform Movement, he is executed along with his brothers on the stage at the village school in front of an angry mob.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY UNDER COMMUNISM

Madeline Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* charts the stories of two families before, during, and after China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Jiang Kai and Sparrow are two friends who play **music** together in Shanghai's conservatory, which, during the Cultural Revolution, is the target of allegedly anti-rightist attacks by the Red Guard, a violent group of young revolutionaries. The Red Guard's interpretation of Maoist communism inspires them to target everyone who seems to prioritize their own wellbeing over the wellbeing of the collective—evidence for this attitude ranges from wearing overly decadent clothing to playing music or

doing other leisure activities that do not actively contribute to the revolution. By portraying the ways in which the Red Guard's violence shapes individuals' choices, Thien demonstrates how political violence in Mao's communist China threatened people's sense of their own identities.

When the Red Guard is attacking various members of the Conservatory, torturing and even killing some of its students and teachers, Zhuli, a talented young violinist, chooses to kill herself for fear of experiencing the Guard's violence. After being publicly beaten for being the daughter of a "convicted rightist," Zhuli decides to commit suicide by hanging herself in the Conservatory. Just before she kills herself, she thinks about how she "want[s] to preserve the core of herself. If they took away music, if they broke her hands, who would she be?" Thien casts Zhuli's decision to commit suicide as the only way that she can choose her freedom and preserve her identity. Music is the most important thing in Zhuli's life, and it is clear that she feels that a life without music isn't much of a life. Zhuli understands that by taking away her agency to do what she loves, the Red Guard has the power to destroy her identity and therefore render her life not worth living.

Sparrow, Zhuli's cousin who survives the Cultural Revolution and is also a musician, leads a life parallel to Zhuli's. While Zhuli chooses to commit suicide to avoid being stripped of the most important aspect of her identity, Sparrow cooperates with the government. He is removed from his job as a teacher at the Conservatory and sent to work in a factory in the countryside. During the riots at Tiananmen Square, Sparrow's daughter, Aiming, is inspired to be critical of the government that forced him to give up his music. When she asks why he doesn't begin composing again, Sparrow thinks to himself that perhaps "the weakness of the times [has] lodged inside him, slowly pulverizing all that [is] unique and his alone, simply because he [has] allowed it to do so." Here, Sparrow seems to recognize that in giving up music, he has given up the activity that brought the most meaning into his life. The "weakness of the times" might refer to the communist belief that people don't need to do what they love; indeed, having individual interests is a threat to the collective. Sparrow's thought process in this moment suggests that Zhuli's premonition when she decided to kill herself was correct—she feared that she would have to give up music, and therefore her identity, which is exactly what happened to Sparrow.

By juxtaposing the experiences of Zhuli and Sparrow, Thien suggests that, in Mao's China, the only way to be true to your own identity was to choose death, or to risk death through resistance. Out of fear, Sparrow chose to cooperate with the government. In a way, both he and Zhuli chose survival: Zhuli chose the survival of her true identity over her literal, physical survival, while Sparrow chose physical survival while letting his true identity die. Both cases demonstrate the extent to which Mao's China infringed upon personal choice to the extent that

maintaining an individual identity became nearly impossible.



CLASS AND COMMUNISM

In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Madeline Thien tells the story of two families who are persecuted by political violence during China's Cultural Revolution. In the name of equal division of resources, during the years of land reform, aristocratic families were accused of being "rightist" and tortured, killed, or sent to work in concentration camps with brutal conditions. What begins as communist China's effort to destroy social hierarchy and create an equal society ends up creating similarly unequal social structures. Thien describes how the children of rightists and landowners are punished too—which means that rightists' low social status can be passed down through generations, thereby creating a fundamentally unequal class system. Thien's discussion of class and communism highlights one of the greatest hypocrisies underlying Mao's communist China.

In the beginning of the novel, a man called Wen the Dreamer and his uncles—wealthy landowners—are taken captive by their village's People's Association for having more wealth than everyone else. Wen the Dreamer, his three uncles, his wife Swirl, and their young daughter Zhuli, are brought to be publicly questioned and beaten in front of their entire village. The villagers accuse the uncles of taking advantage of poor people to acquire wealth by renting them land on unfair terms. During the interrogation, the family is on a stage in front of a laughing, jeering crowd, and two of them "are kicked until they no longer move[] [...] Da Ge and his wife [are] executed [and] torches [are] lit and others demand[] yet more killing." Here, Thien draws readers' attention to the extent to which class inequality created rage in the working class and drove them to communist revolution. The violence in this scene, however, suggests that rather than creating an equal society, the revolutionaries are more focused on persecuting and punishing oppressors. In other words, the working class seeks to create a system in which formerly wealthy people are treated as less-than, rather than equal to, everyone else.

When Zhuli is older and is living with her aunt Big Mother Knife and uncle Ba Lute in Shanghai, the Red Guard targets not just convicted rightists, but people like Zhuli: the children of convicted rightists. On her way to the Conservatory one day during the height of the Cultural Revolution, Zhuli passes a poster that reads, "If the father is a hero, so is the son! If the father is a counter-revolutionary, the son must be a son of a bitch! Dig out the children of rightists, capitalist roaders, and counter-revolutionaries." The poster expresses the belief that those with political ideologies other than communism pass on their beliefs to their children, and that there is no way that children of political prisoners can fully correct their thinking to be integrated into a communist society. In keeping with the poster's ideology, the Red Guard targets Zhuli for being Wen

the Dreamer's daughter, beating her in the streets one day as she waits in line for rations. Beliefs like this create a communist China in which the families of convicted rightists become a social class that is beneath the class formed by, for instance, the children of the first revolutionaries. This creates a stratified society, which goes against one of the foundational principles of communism: equality.

Thien's complex observations about class difference before and after the arrival of communism in China demonstrate the ways in which communists failed to create a truly equal society, and instead created one in which their political allies had class privilege and their suspected political enemies suffered class oppression. This reveals the Party's hypocrisy and, in turn, undermines its moral authority.



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION VS. PROPAGANDA

Much of Madeline Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* centers around **music**. Jiang Kai, Sparrow,

and Zhuli are three of the novel's protagonists, and all study music at Shanghai's Conservatory as the Cultural Revolution progresses. Due to the Cultural Revolution, the government censors the music that members of the Conservatory can play, in the hopes that the musicians will only learn, compose, and play "revolutionary" songs. The musicians, on the other hand, enjoy playing all sorts of music for the sheer joy of creative expression. In emphasizing the conflict between the people's desire to express themselves freely and the government's desire to spread propaganda and maintain complete control, Thien celebrates the value of freedom of expression and warns against the dangers of censorship and propaganda.

When Zhuli, Sparrow, and Kai are at the Conservatory, the censorship of their music becomes increasingly stringent as the Cultural Revolution progresses. At the Conservatory, composers have to give their compositions revolutionary titles, such as "*The Sun Rises on the People's Square*." The fact that the government seeks to control even the titles of instrumental music compositions (which audiences may never see) suggests that its efforts at spreading propaganda are exaggerated, and that perhaps the goal of censorship isn't merely to make sure no counter-revolutionary messages are being spread, but rather simply to suppress the people's creative expression in order to control them. The censorship becomes even more extreme when many students of the Conservatory join the Red Guard. During a political studies class, one of Zhuli's classmates criticizes her for "favoring music in the 'negative' and 'pessimistic' key of E-flat minor." In response, Zhuli "rebuke[s] herself fiercely, vow[ing] to embrace the optimism of C major and G major keys." In this moment, the other student's need to politicize even the key of a musical piece is so extremist that her position becomes ridiculous. Her effort to make everything a tool for propaganda causes her to destroy Zhuli's right to her

own individual taste and ignores the fact that music does not communicate such simple, direct sentiments as "optimism" or "pessimism," but rather speaks in far more abstract ways.

Indeed, Zhuli and Sparrow value music precisely because through music, they express complex, abstract, but deeply felt emotions. For them, music is a tool for creative expression rather than political propaganda. The language Thien uses when describing the feelings that classical music evokes in her characters often involves contradictory emotions. For instance, Sparrow appreciates the piece "Moon Reflected on Second Spring" for its being "a spiral of both radiance and sorrow." Radiance and sorrow are vastly different sentiments, and yet the composer Sparrow admires is able to evoke both in his piece. The fact that Sparrow admires this quality suggests that for him, music is about communicating abstract, complicated feelings, which is the exact opposite of music that is aimed to convey simplistic, pro-government propaganda to its audiences. For Sparrow, music is about expressing the multiplicity and variety of human experience, rather than the straightforward party line of the government.

Sparrow embodies the tension between propaganda and freedom of expression through his life's work. As a musician and composer, he refuses to give his work propagandistic titles, and he seeks to write sonatas that evoke a wide range of human feeling. However, when the government removes him from the Conservatory, he is forced to work in a factory that produces **radios**. Radios symbolize the omnipresence of propaganda in China—throughout the book, characters are forced to listen to government announcements, warnings, and propagandistic news on the radios, which are in homes as well as public spaces. Thus, Sparrow goes from someone whose work embodies freedom of expression to someone whose work facilitates propaganda. During the Tiananmen Square protests, Sparrow hears the "fact of martial law" repeated over and over on the radio, and "regret[s] every radio he [has] ever built." Readers can interpret Sparrow's regret as his frustration at having helped to create a tool that spreads propaganda and oppressive messages to the people. By seeking to distance himself from his work building radios, Sparrow also tries to separate himself from participation in the government's propaganda. Through detailing his and other characters' experiences with propaganda and stifled freedom of expression, Thien demonstrates to readers just how insidious propaganda can be, and, by contrast, how important it is to live in a society that allows for freedom of expression.



POLITICAL OPPRESSION, ISOLATION, AND DIVIDED COMMUNITIES

Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeline Thien is a portrait of China before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. As China transitions to a fully communist government, the country becomes ridden with

political violence, which directly or indirectly causes many of the characters to become separated from their families or communities. Through demonstrating the various ways in which China's government isolates families from one another and divides communities, Thien highlights isolation as one of the lesser-known evils of authoritarian government.

The novel begins with Li-Ling's narration of the suicide of her father, Jiang Kai. She describes her feelings of loneliness and abandonment now that her father is gone and she and her mother are left to fend for themselves in Canada, a country far from their home in China. As Li-Ling contemplates her feelings of isolation after her father's death, she thinks to herself that in "poorer countries," she and her mother wouldn't be so lonely. "In fact," she thinks, "a way to punish someone might be to remove them from their circle of family and friends, isolate them in a cold country, and shatter them with loneliness." Here, Thien introduces readers to the idea that migration—and therefore, isolation—is a consequence of authoritarian governments. While Li-Ling does not know this, her parents fled China because they found that living under an authoritarian regime restricted their freedom to an extent they were not comfortable with. In this way, the loneliness she experiences as a migrant in Canada is, indirectly, a punishment for her parents' refusal to accept living under the conditions the Chinese government mandated. This is the first moment that Thien introduces loneliness as a consequence of a politically oppressive society.

Indeed, Li-Ling's loneliness is caused by China's oppressive government in more than one way. Her father, Jiang Kai, commits suicide because he has become severely depressed over the actions he took to survive in China. As a member of the Red Guard, he tortured and berated his friend at the Conservatory, Zhuli, which likely contributed to her suicide. Later, perhaps to assuage his own guilt, he invites Zhuli's cousin, Sparrow, to meet him in Hong Kong so the two can discuss the possibility of Kai's sponsoring Sparrow to move to Canada. However, Sparrow is murdered by the Chinese army before they are able to meet, and Kai blames himself for this—it is possible that by having papers to go to Hong Kong, Sparrow was more suspicious to the government. All of this guilt leads Kai to commit suicide, abandoning his daughter and wife to isolation in a foreign country. Thien is intentional in discussing the many ways in which China's political oppression created situations that caused Kai depression. Thus his suicide—and, consequently, the isolation his family experiences—is an indirect consequence of political oppression.

While Jiang Kai's suicide represents a more indirect way that China's political oppression causes citizens to feel isolation, Sparrow's family's experience with the Red Guard exemplifies a more direct way that political oppression divides communities and therefore isolates people. As the Red Guard becomes increasingly violent and active in Shanghai, Sparrow's two

younger brothers, Da Shan and Flying Bear, join the violent movement—even though the Red Guards are persecuting Zhuli, their cousin, and Ba Lute, their father. After Zhuli commits suicide, Flying Bear says she must have been guilty, because "only the guilty kill themselves," and he "vow[s] never to come home again." Here, the fact that Flying Bear would turn on his own cousin—with whom he was raised—demonstrates the extent to which the Red Guard's propaganda and fearmongering is insidious. The Red Guard is powerful enough to separate family members from one another emotionally, even when they're still together physically. What's more, the ability to separate family members from one another only makes the Red Guard more powerful: since people are willing to turn in members of their own families, the Red Guard is truly able to persecute all who might be against the government. In this way, isolation and divided communities are not only a consequence of political oppression; the division of communities is, rather, a tool that allows political oppression under Mao to continue and grow stronger.

Through her depiction of various characters' experiences with isolation and divided community, Thien demonstrates how family separation and isolation from one's community is, at best, one of the most painful consequences of authoritarian regimes and, at worst, one of the most effective tools to allow authoritarianism to continue.



STORYTELLING, FAMILY CONNECTION, AND HISTORY

Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* tells the stories of two families who are subject to political oppression during China's Cultural Revolution. The story is narrated by Li-ling, a first-generation Chinese Canadian woman whose father, Jiang Kai, survived the Cultural Revolution and escaped to China, only commit suicide when Li-ling was 10 years old. Kai left behind scores of documents for his family after his death, including [The Book of Records](#), a mysterious text that begins as fiction but gradually turns into a record of Kai's history, and the family history of his close friend and music teacher, Sparrow. When Sparrow's daughter, Ai-ming, arrives in Canada to live with Li-ling and her mother, she begins reading *The Book of Records* to Li-ling, which is what initially interests her in exploring her father's story. Thien describes the evolution of *The Book of Records* from fiction into a narrative account that preserves Sparrow's family history and highlights Li-ling's dedication, as an adult, to piecing together her father's story. By drawing readers' attention to these aspects of the novel, Thien highlights how storytelling is an important tool that allows family histories to survive even in the face of oppressive regimes that seek to erase them.

When the Dreamer is the character who first introduces *The Book of Records* to the storyline, and over the course of the novel he uses the book to unite family members with one

another and to record family history that otherwise would have been forgotten. Readers are first exposed to *The Book of Records* when Wen sends chapters of it to his future wife, Swirl, in an effort to woo her. The two meet for the first time at the Old Cat's bookshop as they try to find the missing chapters of the book, and they are married soon after. This is the first of many examples throughout the novel in which *The Book of Records* serves as a tool to unite characters with one another. Indeed, after Swirl, released from the re-education camp where she was sent as punishment for being a rightist, hears that Wen has escaped from his own re-education camp, she goes about trying to find him by scattering altered copies of *The Book of Records* throughout the region of the country in which she believes Wen is hiding. She encodes a secret location, her friend Lady Dostoevsky's plant and flower clinic, into the chapters of the book. Wen ultimately finds the book and hacks the code and is reunited with his long-lost wife. Although the Chinese government had indirectly attempted to separate the couple by placing them in separate concentration camps with life-threatening conditions, Swirl and Wen are able to reunite in the face of such oppression due to their creative use of storytelling.

The Book of Records doesn't just connect family members to one another within generations; it also helps future generations have access to the stories of their ancestors. When Wen the Dreamer resolves that he can no longer find more chapters of the original book, he begins copying his family's stories into the book. Because many members of the family do things that go against the government's wishes—he and Swirl are convicted rightists, Sparrow and Zhuli, Wen's daughter, are labeled counterrevolutionaries because they Western classical **music**—Wen's choice to tell their stories honestly is an act of resistance. The government's purpose, through the Cultural Revolution, was to eliminate "rightists" and "counterrevolutionaries," completely erasing the place in China's culture and, consequently, China's history. In telling their story, Wen maintains a true record of the family's history, preventing the government from erasing his family's story.

It is thanks to Wen's transcription of the family history into *The Book of Records* that Li-ling is able to better understand her late father. In this way, *The Book of Records* serves to connect family members to one another across generations. Through her descriptions of Li-ling's character, Thien conveys to readers that an understanding of family history is integral to Li-ling's understanding of herself. Over the course of the novel, Li-ling states multiple times that she tries to forget about the book, her father, and Ai-ming—who disappears from her life after leaving Canada to seek asylum in the United States—by burying herself in her work as a mathematics professor. However, Li-ling's efforts to ignore family history always fail, and she ends up taking multiple trips to China to try to find Ai-ming and discover what happened to her father. By emphasizing the fact

that Li-ling cannot allow herself to avoid engaging with her family's history, Thien implies that the impulse to preserve and understand family history is an inescapable part of finding one's own identity. Ultimately, Li-ling follows in Swirl's footsteps, leaving altered copies of *The Book of Records* on the Internet and in cities across China that have encoded messages that, she hopes, will help Ai-ming to find her. In this way, Li-ling preserves family history both by recording herself into *The Book of Records* and by repeating the actions of her ancestors.

While Thien does paint integrating and understanding family history as an integral part of Li-ling's development, she is careful to emphasize the importance of individual development as well. The novel ends with Li-ling writing that she "continue[s] to live [her] life, to let [her] parents go and seek [her] own freedom." In this moment, Thien highlights the importance of balancing individual identity with family identity. Indeed, the reason that Li-ling's family is so persecuted during the Cultural Revolution is, in large part, their dedication to their own individuality. Thus, the use of family storytelling in the novel serves both to connect family members with one another and to record everyone's full, unique, identity, giving them space to be themselves and to be remembered for their individuality.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



RADIOS

Radios symbolize the performance of revolutionary politics in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. The characters that are in disagreement with Chairman Mao's politics often blast the radio to distract others from hearing what is really going on in their homes. For instance, when Kai takes Sparrow and Zhuli to a meeting of people who resist Chairman Mao, the hosts of the meeting blast the radio to make sure no one hears the illicit books they are reading inside. In this way, the radio functions as the performance of revolutionary politics, rather than the politics themselves: to eavesdroppers, it would appear that the members of the meeting agree with the propaganda on the radio, but really, they are using the radio simply to disguise the fact that they are a resistance group. In other words, the radio functions as a disguise rather than as a genuine form of communication. Similarly, when Sparrow is listening to illegal music in order to transcribe it, Ba Lute blasts the radio to prevent the neighbors from realizing that there is illegal music being played in his household.



THE BOOK OF RECORDS

The Book of Records symbolizes family bonds and storytelling as an act of resistance. In the novel, *The Book of Records* is a mysterious piece of fiction that Ai-ming discovers in the papers that Kai left behind for Li-ling and her mother after his suicide. Ai-ming begins to read Li-ling *The Book of Records*, and through the stories told in it, Li-ling learns about the stories of past generations of both her family and Ai-ming's family. She learns that *The Book of Records* first appeared when Ai-ming's great uncle, Wen the Dreamer gifts Swirl, her great aunt, chapters of it to woo her. Eventually, however, Wen the Dreamer cannot find any more chapters, and he begins to write new chapters himself. In these, he tells his own story, and, what's more, encodes secret messages for his family that allow them to discover his whereabouts—Wen the Dreamer has been sent to a re-education camp in the Northwest of China, only to escape and live on the run from the government. When Swirl learns of this, she scatters altered chapters of *The Book of Records* in the region where Wen is traveling that include an encoded message that tell him where to meet her. It is through communicating via codes hidden in the novel that Swirl and Wen are eventually reunited, even though the government has, through sending them to separate re-education camps, tried to separate them. In this way, not only does *The Book of Records* serve to connect family members to one another, both within and across generations, but it also acts as a tool that allows the characters to resist the oppressive political regime that tries to isolate family members from one another.



MUSIC

In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, music symbolizes the expression of individual identity through art in the midst of cultural oppression. Zhuli and Sparrow are both dedicated musicians—Sparrow is a composer, and Zhuli is a violinist. At the Shanghai Conservatory in the 1960s, most composers give their compositions political titles about revolution or resistance. Sparrow, however, gives his only numbers as titles, suggesting that for him, music is not a form of political expression but rather one of personal expression. During the Cultural Revolution, Zhuli is tortured extensively by the Red Guards, who also destroy her violin. One day, she thinks to herself that if they broke her hands and she could no longer play her instrument, her life would no longer be worth living, and so she commits suicide. In some ways, readers can view the breaking of Zhuli's violin as the destruction of her identity and, because she is unwilling to live without music, which is an integral part of her individual identity, Zhuli decides to end her life. Zhuli dies because she does not want to live in a culturally repressive society that does not allow for individual expression. Through illustrating in particular Zhuli's commitment to music, Thien highlights the importance of

individual expression to living a meaningful life.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* published in 2017.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● [...] in poorer countries, people like Ma and me would not be so lonely. On television, poor countries were crowded places, overloaded elevators trying to rise to the sky. People slept six to a bed, a dozen to a room [...] In fact, the way to punish someone might be to remove them from their circle of family and friends, isolate them in a cold country, and shatter them with loneliness.

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Jiang Kai, Li-ling's mother

Related Themes:



Page Number: 9


Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, 10-year-old Li-ling is lying in bed contemplating her feelings surrounding her father's death. In committing suicide, Jiang Kai has left his family—just Li-ling and her mother—all by themselves in Canada, where they, as Chinese immigrants, already experience cultural isolation from the community. This quote is important because it is what first introduces readers to loneliness as a consequence of political instability. Indeed, Li-ling's family is only in Canada, readers will later learn, because her parents' homeland of China was ruled by such a repressive government that Kai and his wife felt the need to flee. In this way, the isolation she and her mother experience in Canada is, in a way, a punishment—it's a negative consequence of her parents' disagreement with China's repressive policies. In other words, the price they pay for not wanting to live under China's political oppression is isolation in a foreign land.

●● My father had once said that music was full of silences. He had left nothing for me, no letter, no message. Not a word.

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Jiang Kai

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15


Explanation and Analysis

Here, the young Li-ling is remembering her father, Jiang Kai, who has recently committed suicide. Only after his death does she discover that he was a famous musician in China. The fact that he told her that “music was full of silences” is interesting in light of this. By not disclosing the extent of his musical talent to his daughter, Jiang Kai himself was silent to her in a way even while he was alive. He did not disclose one of the most important parts of his identity to her, and even after death left nothing behind that would help Li-ling to feel close to her father. Kai’s failure to communicate much about his life to his daughter—his many silences, both in life and after death—set the stage for a novel in which Li-ling’s exploration of her family’s past is one of the central themes. She seeks to understand what lies behind his silences by retracing family history.

☞ Remember what I say: music is the great love of the People. If we sing a beautiful song, the People will never abandon us. Without the musician, all life would be loneliness.

Related Characters: Big Mother Knife (speaker), Sparrow

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This is a passage from *The Book of Records* about when Sparrow was growing up. Sparrow was raised during the war between the Communists and the Nationalists, and he had an unstable childhood—he was always on the road, working as a traveling musician with his mother, Big Mother Knife. In this moment, Big Mother Knife is explaining to Sparrow the importance of music, particularly in the context of a nation stricken by violence. Because their lives are so unstable, it’s important to Big Mother Knife and Sparrow that others not “abandon” them—that they have people to look after them during these difficult times. Big Mother Knife’s belief about music is that it’s something that unifies people, which highlights the importance of music in



Sparrow’s family.


At the same time, however, Big Mother Knife’s assertion that music is “the great love of the People,” will be greatly challenged by the story’s unfolding, when, during Communist China, music falls under heavy censorship and criticism from the government, precisely because Chairman Mao believes that music is bourgeois—and therefore against, rather than for, the People. This quote sets up the two different ideologies about music that exist in the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ The novel leaped and turned, as if entire chapters or pages had been ripped out; but Swirl, too, had been uprooted by the war, and she had no trouble filling in the missing gaps.

Related Characters: Wen the Dreamer, Swirl

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40



Explanation and Analysis

This is the first passage in which *The Book of Records* is introduced in the novel. Wen the Dreamer has been sending passages of the book to Swirl in an effort to woo her. Swirl is captivated by the story even though the narrative is inconsistent, omitting pages and chapters. But Swirl’s experience growing up during a war, when people were constantly separated from one another and family members lost track of each other’s lives during years of separation, allows her to understand the story. Thien’s choice to link Swirl’s own experience with the narrative told in *The Book of Records* prepares readers for the fact that *The Book of Records* will include the stories of Swirl and many members of her family—because they are so similar to the tales already told in the story, Swirl and her family’s histories blend right in to the epic about loss, instability and migration.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Wen’s nose began to bleed. The man slapped him repeatedly, as if he were disciplining a child. The crowd was laughing and the laughter had a sharp, bleating sound. Two men on the stage were kicked until they no longer moved. Swirl thought she must be hallucinating when the guns were drawn and Da Ge and his wife were executed.

Related Characters: Da Ge, Wen the Dreamer, Swirl

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis


In this moment, Wen the Dreamer and his wealthy, landlord uncles have been taken by the local branches of Party officials in their village to the local school, where they are being humiliated and tortured on the stage for all to see. This passage highlights the violence with which the villagers treat their former landlord. Their brutality demonstrates how deeply they resented the class inequality in China that preceded communism. It also shows how prevalent violence is in the particular ideology of communism that the government has embraced. Rather than trying to create an equal society in which all can thrive, the villagers seem preoccupied with punishing former class oppressors. Their actions have far more to do with revenge than with rehabilitation. Inherently, the choice to treat formerly wealthy people with cruelty—even murder them—is not based on an understanding that all in the society are equal. Rather, under the new communism, it seems that all that has happened is that the formerly poor have the social status of the formerly wealthy, and vice versa. This is the foundation for the growth of yet another unequal society.

☛ Big Mother continued through the rooms. Now she found herself at the foot of the alcove steps. Putting aside her walking stick. She paused to offer a poem to the God of Literature because, after all, these mysterious notebooks belonged to his domain. She recited:

When the mind is exalted,
the body is lightened
and feels as if it could float in the wind.
This city is famed as a center of letters;
and all you writers coming here
prove that the name of a great land
is made by better things than wealth.

Related Characters: Big Mother Knife (speaker), Wen the Dreamer, Swirl

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 72


Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Big Mother Knife is on her way to steal *The Book of Records* from Swirl and Wen the Dreamer's former home. Local villagers have kicked the couple and their daughter out of their large estate, and even though it is dangerous, Swirl is intent upon finding and recovering *The Book of Records*. Big Mother Knife, wanting to protect her sister, has offered to go for her. She recites a poem before entering the underground library where Swirl has told her the book is stored. While Swirl and Wen the Dreamer could get in trouble for having *The Book of Records* simply because it is literature, and literature is considered bourgeois, the poem Big Mother Knife recites establishes a different relationship between poetry and wealth. In fact, it distances literature from wealth, saying that literature is so sacred that it belongs to a realm far greater than that of material wealth. By choosing this poem for Big Mother Knife to recite, Thien problematizes the Communist Party's association of literature with material wealth and the bourgeois.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ "One should be careful of the sun," the man said, as if talking to himself. He reached out, pulled the string, and the fan started up once more. "One should learn to practice in the shade."

Related Characters: Ba Lute, Swirl (speaker), Wen the Dreamer

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Swirl and Wen the Dreamer have just been sent to re-education camps in the Northwest of the country. Ba Lute, because he is a high-ranking Party official, has decided to go to speak with the Party officers in Swirl and Wen's village to see if there's anything he can do to get them out of trouble. The man he is talking to, the speaker of this quote, is the head of the Party in the village. He and Ba Lute played in the Conservatory together before the war, and Ba Lute alluded to those days in trying to get his former colleague to do him a favor. The man has refused, and his words here are ominous. Swirl and Wen were sent to the re-education camps precisely for their bourgeois appreciation for the arts: the villagers found stashes of books hidden in an underground secret library on their property. Therefore,

the official's assertion that one should learn to "practice in the shade" is an indicator that times are coming when public appreciation of the arts is likely to be seen as counterrevolutionary in the eyes of the government. The official hints at the coming censorship and attacks on the arts that Swirl, Wen, and others like them will continue to be punished for.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ The students began offering criticisms of themselves and each other, and the girl next to her, an erhu major, mocked Zhuli for favoring music in the "negative" and "pessimistic" key of E-flat minor, and continuing to play sonatas by revisionist Soviet composers, including the disgraced formalist, Prokofiev. Zhuli rebuked herself fiercely, vowed to embrace the optimism of the C and G major keys, and ended her self-criticism with, "Long live the Great Revolution to create a proletarian culture, long live the Republic, long live Chairman Mao!"

Related Characters: Zhuli

Related Themes:    



Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Zhuli is in her political studies class at the Shanghai Conservatory. This particular criticism that a fellow student has made of her is absurd, and it shows how deeply embedded communist propaganda is in the students' thinking. Classical music does not convey a specific political message, and yet under Mao's regime, everything has become politicized, and the students eagerly read counterrevolutionary sentiments into Zhuli's musical choices. Their analysis that E-minor is "pessimistic"—and therefore, not supportive of a revolutionary culture—is a stretch. E-minor does not communicate any specific message; even if it were to be pessimistic, there is no need to interpret this pessimism within the context of a revolution. Similarly, Zhuli's commitment to playing in C and G major keys should say nothing about her own politics, rather, such a statement should have to do with her aesthetic tastes. But they live in a society that encourages them to consider everything within the framework of revolutionary versus counterrevolutionary, even music, which is a medium for free creative expression.

☞ Both Kai and her cousin had unassailable class backgrounds, they were Sons of the Soil, Sons of Revolutionary Heroes, Sons of...she laughed and drank the wine.

Related Characters: Jiang Kai (speaker), Sparrow, Zhuli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 139


Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Zhuli, Sparrow, and Kai have stayed up late at the Conservatory drinking wine. Zhuli is reflecting on the increasing political tension at the Conservatory, where the students are becoming more and more critical of their teachers and fellow classmates whom they deem counterrevolutionary. Zhuli believes that Kai and Sparrow have "unassailable" class backgrounds because, in Mao's Communist China, revolutionary identity is inherited through families. In other words, people like Sparrow and Kai don't have to do anything to prove their own revolutionary ideology, since their fathers have already done that for them. This is a highly hypocritical approach to class, as the ability to inherit class privilege from one's parents inherently creates class inequality. Zhuli herself, being the daughter of "convicted rightists" has the opposite experience of Sparrow and Kai, in that her class background leaves her vulnerable to political attack rather than protected from it.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ Not knowing what else to do, Ma and I wandered through Chinatown, carrying a photograph of Ai-ming from restaurant to restaurant. One after another, people studied the picture and shook their heads [...] A poem from the Book of Records lodged in my thought, *Family members wander, scattered on the road, attached to shadows / Longing for home, five landscapes merge into a single city.*

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Li-ling's mother, Ai-ming

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 146


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Li-ling and her mother have gone to Chinatown New York to look for Ai-ming, whom they haven't seen since she left their home for the United States five years ago. The image of two women walking through the streets showing a loved one's photograph is sorrowful, and it highlights the pain they feel at having been separated from Ai-ming due to political circumstances—in this case, Canada's stringent immigration policy. Their dedication to finding Ai-ming highlights the strength of their family connection even through the pain of being apart. But the quote from *The Book of Records* has a slightly more positive message; the last line suggests that although the families may be physically apart, they are united in their collective search and longing for each other. This emphasizes the power and endurance of emotional bonds between family members. Although Ai-ming lived for a very short time with Li-ling and her mother, their emotional connection remains strong.

Written on the inside of the lining were the names of all the men who had died, and the dates of their falling. It is, I believe, the only accurate record that exists. He told me he had a plan to do something more. He would take the names of the dead and hide them, one by one, in the Book of Records, alongside May Fourth and Da-wei. He would populate this fictional world with true names and true deeds. They would live on, as dangerous as revolutionaries but as intangible as ghosts.

Related Characters: Comrade Glass Eye (speaker), Sparrow, Wen the Dreamer

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Sparrow is speaking with Comrade Glass Eye, and old friend of Ba Lute's, in an effort to find out what may have happened to Wen the Dreamer. Comrade Glass Eye has revealed to Sparrow that he and Wen were at the same re-education camp in the Northwest, where the conditions were horrible and many people starved to death. In this particular instance, Comrade Glass Eye is talking about Wen's plan to record the deaths and deeds of these men in *The Book of Records*. This moment is significant because here readers learn that Wen isn't just including family stories in *The Book of Records*, rather, he's interested

in including the stories of all those who have been marginalized under China's politically repressive regime. The fact that he thinks that these stories make the men "dangerous as revolutionaries" suggests that Wen believes in history's power to shape political thought. Clearly, he believes that if the people find out about the government's atrocities, they are likely to rebel against the government, thus ending the period of such extreme oppression. In this way, Thien highlights Wen's belief in storytelling's ability to create political impact.

Men whose only crime was honest criticism were digging ditches and wasting away. Meanwhile, back home, their families lived in ignominy, their kids were hounded in schools or kicked out altogether, their houses were confiscated, their possessions trashed, their wives forced to beg on the streets [...]

Related Characters: Comrade Glass Eye (speaker), Wen the Dreamer, Sparrow

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 177



Explanation and Analysis

Here, Comrade Glass Eye is telling Sparrow about the time he spent at a re-education camp in the Northwest with Wen the Dreamer. His description of the camps—that the labor was far too intense, that the men were going hungry—suggests that the living conditions there were inhumane and the people were being subjected to cruel and unfair punishment. This paints the government in a negative light, and his descriptions of what happens to the families of convicted rightists further emphasizes the government's cruelty. It is unfair that the families of convicted rightists should have to bear the burden of the convict's wrongdoing. In particular, society's choice to punish counterrevolutionaries' children is problematic. In barring the children from school, society prevents them from accessing the same opportunities of other children, which puts them in a lower social class. This plants the seed for social inequality.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ If some people say what is in their hearts and other people say what glides easily off the tongue, how can we talk to one another? We will never find common purpose, I believe in the Party, of course, and I don't want to lose faith. I will never lose faith...

Related Characters: Tofu Liu (speaker), Zhuli

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Zhuli has just run into Tofu Liu at a park near the Shanghai Conservatory. At the Conservatory, the students—now involved with the Cultural Revolution as Red Guards—are attacking the teachers and even each other. Tofu Liu offers sincere criticism about the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution. He has astutely observed that the Red Guards simply repeat propaganda not necessarily because they believe it, but because they know that espousing those values will protect them from experiencing political violence. He, on the other hand, says what he truly believes—as he is doing in this moment. This statement points to the tension between propaganda and unique, individual thought. Tofu Liu emphasizes that when the two coexist in society, it is unlikely that anyone can find common ground. It is unclear whether the last two sentences express things that he truly believes in—in other words, whether Tofu Liu is “speaking from the heart” when he says that he believes in the Party, or whether he is saying that because he feels unsafe offering up such honest political criticism. This adds another layer of complexity to his statement.

☞ “If the neighborhood can turn in one family of counterrevolutionaries, the whole block might be saved. People are just trying to get by.”

Related Characters: Zhuli (speaker), Jiang Kai

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Zhuli is at an underground meeting of people who resist the government's repression and censorship with Kai. The group is discussing the Red Guards

and the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Zhuli is not defending the Red Guards, but she has put her finger on one of the most important motivations behind their work: they want to protect their families, and if in denouncing someone else they can be safe, they will. She highlights how the government has created a system that incentivizes people to spy on and distrust one another—the government has pitted people against each other, thereby severely weakening communities. Under communism, the government purports to strengthen communities, but in practice the opposite is true. What the government does succeed in doing through this practice is to strengthen its own power. When the people are divided, the government can easily exercise power over them, as a divided people are unlikely to be able to unite to overthrow the government. This highlights the authoritarian inequality behind Mao's government.

☞ Young people were ransacking the distribution warehouse, even pulling out the workers. Zhuli closed her eyes. “Unmask them!” “Bourgeois rats!” “Drag them out!” The shouting had a merry, dancing quality, a French pierrot two-step. “Cleanly, quickly, cut off their heads!” From where had this crowd appeared? She heard a rupture like a pane coming down to land, but it was only this electrified, heaving mass of people. Time was slipping away. Soon it would be too late. “Just shout the slogans,” the girl beside her whispered, “Quickly! They're watching you. Oh, why are you so afraid?”

Related Characters: Zhuli

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis



In this moment, Zhuli is standing in line waiting for rations, and the Red Guards have begun to attack the women standing in line. The fact that some of the young people participating in the Cultural Revolution have taken advantage of the moment raid the storehouse shows that they don't deeply believe in the communist values they claim to be fighting for. It seems that if they really believed in equality, they would not undermine the ration system, which ensures that everyone gets equal and fair amounts of food.


On another note, Zhuli's hesitance to shout the slogans stems from her understanding of her own beliefs and her commitment to them. She does not want to shout the

slogans because deep down she doesn't believe them, and she doesn't support the Red Guards' actions. What's more, the girl's advice, "Just shout the slogans!" suggests that the people use the slogans not to express their genuine belief in the government, but simply to protect themselves from persecution.

“I am ready now,” she thought, “to bring all these flowers for...I will find all the flowers, even if I must steal them from the hands of our Great Leader, I will lay them at Prokofiev's feet.” She had given every bit of her soul to music.

Related Characters: Zhuli

Related Themes:  



Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Zhuli has just been beaten severely by the Red Guards while waiting in line for rations. However, rather than intimidating her into adopting their values, the Red Guards' torture has had the opposite effect. Zhuli's dedication to music, even though such a sentiment will get her into trouble in this violent political climate, has reached new heights. In fact, by thinking that she would take flowers from the Chairman to put at Prokofiev's feet, she explicitly confirms that music is far more important to her than her country's politics or even her own safety. She wishes to treat music with reverence, and she commits to dedicating her entire life to music at any cost.

The official news program announced that Lao She, whose plays Wen the Dreamer had loved, and who had once been celebrated as “the People's artist,” had drowned himself. To celebrate his death, joyful marching music danced from the speakers.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

This moment takes place in the middle of some of the worst Red Guard violence of the Cultural Revolution. At this point, many of the characters, including Zhuli and Sparrow, have been tortured by the Red Guards at the Conservatory—Zhuli in particular has been tortured for her apolitical love of music. This moment provides an interesting contrast to the Red Guards' denunciation of music that isn't political. Here, the government has used music in a way that the Red Guards would deem appropriate, as a form of violent propaganda. The fact that they would celebrate someone's death with joyful, marching music is grotesque, and it highlights just how much they devalue the lives of those who express political dissent. Furthermore, the playwright who died clearly killed himself for fear of being heavily persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, which further sheds light on how strong the Red Guards' persecution of artists and musicians was.

She wrote directly overtop of the denunciations on the poster, so that “brother” appeared over “leader,” “vague” over “reactionary,” and “high bluffs” sat overtop “demon-exposing mirror.”

Related Characters: Zhuli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Zhuli is in the Conservatory, which the Red Guards have taken over, and she is writing on top of a poster they've put on the wall that is calling for counterrevolutionaries to be punished. Zhuli has selected a passage from a novel to write over the original poster, and the particular words she uses are significant. That “vague” appears over “reactionary,” for instance, illuminates the fact that many allegations against those who have been accused of being rightists are dubious—the Red Guards' evidence usually doesn't add up to their victim being a rightist reactionary. “High bluffs” over “demon-exposing mirror” has the same effect: with this, Zhuli highlights the lack of sincerity and evidence in the Red Guards' ideology, implying that what they take as evidence that certain people are “demons”—in this case, convicted rightists and counterrevolutionaries—are really nothing but bluffs.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ “You wrote to Chairman Mao? You ridiculous oaf of a man.” “Our own sons denounced me,” Ba Lute said, broken. “Da Shan and Flying Bear say they want nothing to do with us. But I have faith that Chairman Mao, our Great Leader, our Saving Star, will redeem us.”

It was, and would always be, the only thing he had ever said that made her weep.

Related Characters: Big Mother Knife, Ba Lute (speaker), Flying Bear, Da Shan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis



Here, after the worst part of the Cultural Revolution has ended, Big Mother Knife has returned to Shanghai after helping Swirl escape the country. She has discovered that Ba Lute has been sent to a re-education camp and has gone to visit him there. During this conversation, the different political ideologies of Big Mother Knife and her husband become very clear. While Big Mother Knife, having witnessed the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, clearly has lost faith in the government, Ba Lute is delusional and remains hopeful that Chairman Mao will save him—even after the Party has demonstrated total disregard for his wellbeing by sending him to a re-education camp. This shows how desperate Ba Lute is to maintain his belief in the very political party that he fought so hard to get in power.


On another note, the fact that Da Shan and Flying Bear have denounced their own father shows the strength and persuasiveness of the Party’s propagandistic messages, as they manage to separate families from one another. The dissolution of family loyalty only makes people more dependent on the Party to give them a sense of meaning and connection.

Chapter 6 (II) Quotes

☞ In school, they recited essays about what made a good revolutionary. She began to wonder what made a good father, a good grandmother, a good enemy, a good person.

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Li-ling’s mother, Ai-ming

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 306


Explanation and Analysis

Here, Thien describes the young Ai-ming’s reactions to the types of reading she has to do in school. In wondering what makes a good grandmother or a good person, Ai-ming is demonstrating interest in individual identity rather than collective identity. The contrast between “a good person” and “a good revolutionary” is particularly stark, especially since over the course of the novel readers have seen the many ways in which being a “good” revolutionary has meant the opposite of what many would consider to be being a good person. Revolutionaries in the novel have shown themselves to be violent, reactionary, selfish, and incapable of critical thought, among other things. While the propagandistic regime she lives under seeks to educate children primarily in terms of political engagement, Ai-ming shows interest in people’s unique identities. In this way, she shows her own individuality, even at such a young age—she is an independent thinker who doesn’t take what her teacher tells her at face value. By characterizing Ai-ming as independent and able to think critically, Thien highlights the importance of the ability to express individual identity.

☞ In the morning, loudspeakers cried out the same turbulent song: “The Esteemed and Great Leader of our Party, our army and the People, Comrade Mao Zedong, leader of the international proletariat, has died...” Big Mother walked the shrouded streets. [...] She thought of her sister and Wen, of her lost boys and Ba Lute, the unwritten music, the desperate lives, the bitter untruths they had told themselves and passed on to their children. How every day of Sparrow’s factor life was filled with humiliations. Party cadres withheld his rations, demanded self-criticisms, scorned the way he held his head, his pencil, his hands, his silence.

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Li-ling’s mother, Ai-ming

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 309


Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, Chairman Mao has just died and Big Mother Knife is reflecting on all of the horrible things that have happened to her and her family under his rule. Her inner thoughts contrast starkly with the messages being portrayed on the loudspeakers. While the propaganda insists that the People will greatly miss Chairman Mao, Big Mother Knife's thoughts reveal the opposite. Her memories of violence, political repression, censorship, and the painful separation of her family members from one another show just how oppressive Chairman Mao's regime was. She highlights the difference between the image the Party paints of itself through propaganda and the realities that many of its people experience. In particular, the way Sparrow has been treated by the government shows that, in spite of its communist values, the Party creates structures of class inequality. The fact that Sparrow, due to being a "convicted rightist," is subject to all kinds of maltreatment from the Party shows that they create various levels of class privilege based on loyalty to the Party.

●● In the new trousers, baby blue shirt, and leather shoes that Ling had given him for the 1988 Spring Festival, her father looked taller. Or, maybe he only looked this way because, when he wore his usual clothes, the uniform of Huizhou Semiconductor Factory No. 1, Sparrow never stood up straight.

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Sparrow, Ling, Ai-ming

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 325



Explanation and Analysis


Here, Sparrow is taking Ai-ming to see a classical music concert for the first time in her life. This takes place after Chairman Mao has died, and the government now has much more lenient policies regarding freedom of expression. Sparrow's "baby blue shirt" and the fact that he is going to a concert at all are evidence of this. Ai-ming's observation the Sparrow looks "taller" suggests that when he is in an environment where he is able to appreciate music, he is able to truly be himself. Furthermore, the idea that he stands up straight when he attends a concert suggests that in this environment, Sparrow is able to respect himself, whereas when he is in his factory work environment—which he entered for the first time essentially because the

government wished to punish him for being a convicted rightist—he doesn't feel a great deal of self-respect. By highlighting the contrast between Sparrow's behavior in these two different settings, Thien emphasizes how important it is that individuals be able to express themselves, and put their talents to use in ways that feel meaningful to them.

●● "The music you used to write, Ba, was it criminal music?" He could only say, "I don't know." That same night, he wrote a new banner for the front door which read, *May the Red Sun keep rising for ten thousand years*, in calligraphy that was accomplished but empty, a fixed smile. He might as well have written Joy! on a plastic bucket.

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Sparrow, Ai-ming

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ai-ming has just asked Sparrow about the compositions he would write when he was employed at the Conservatory. These are the most authentic manifestations of Sparrow's self-expression that Sparrow has been able to create in his life. However, he was punished for just that creative expression so severely that he is likely traumatized. Therefore, he chooses to write a meaningless slogan on the door of his house, presumably because thinking about music reminds him of the time when the Red Guards severely punished any sort of creative self-expression or individual thinking. Thien's use of the phrase "empty, fixed smile" to characterize the propagandistic phrase Sparrow has written on the door fit perfectly. While music is a genuine form of self-expression—a genuine smile, to extend the metaphor—the propaganda that Sparrow uses to hide his true nature and protect himself is totally empty of meaning.

Chapter 5 (II) Quotes

●● For as long as she could remember, right and wrong had been represented by the Party through color. Truth and beauty, for instance, were hóng (red), while criminality and falsehood were hēi (black). Her mother was red, her father was black.

Related Characters: Sparrow, Ling, Ai-ming

Related Themes:    



Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Ai-ming and Sparrow have just moved from the rural south of China to Beijing, where they live with Ling. Ai-ming is reflecting on the colors at Tiananmen Square and thinking about the binary moral values that the government has associated with them. The simplistic duality with which the government treats concepts such as good and bad highlights the lack of critical thinking from which propaganda originates. What's more, the fact that Ai-ming has such a clear picture in her head that her father is "bad", and her mother is "good" simply because of their political beliefs shows how extensively the government has repressed Sparrow during his lifetime, and how even under communism society has two classes. The "good" privileged ones agree with the government—or the ones who, like Ling, merely pretend to agree with the government and stay out of trouble—and the "bad" less privileged ones dare to express dissent.

☞ The architecture was intended to make a person feel insignificant, but Ai-ming felt confusingly large, there was so much room here, a child could run in any pattern, any shape, never encounter anyone or anything.

Related Characters: Sparrow, Ai-ming

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 357

Explanation and Analysis



This moment takes place at the beginning of what will become the Tiananmen Square protests. Ai-ming and Sparrow are going on a bike ride around the city when they stop at Tiananmen Square. Ai-ming, who has been involved in the student movements, is expressing her opinion in public for the first time. This likely has to do with her feeling "confusingly large" in this moment—she is learning to take up more space in public with her opinion. Her mention that


the architecture was intended to make people feel small subtly references the oppressive nature of the government that seeks to erase people's individual identities in favor of creating a strong collective. Her thought that "a child could run in any pattern" is her imagining of freedom to choose one's path. She is imagining this freedom for herself for the first time.

Coda Quotes

☞ I continue to live my life, to let my parents go and seek my own freedom. I will wait for Ai-ming to find me and I continue to believe that I will find her—tomorrow, perhaps, or in a dozen years. She will reach up for a book on a shelf. [...] And when she does, she will disbelieve and then a line will come back to her, words she overheard on the street long ago but has never fully forgotten. *Tomorrow beings from another dawn, when we will be fast asleep. Remember what I say; not everything will pass.*

Related Characters: Marie / Jiang Li-ling (speaker), Ai-ming, Ling, Jiang Kai

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 463

Explanation and Analysis

This is the last paragraph of the book. Li-ling is dedicated to finding Ai-ming, from whom she's been separated for years. Her continued commitment to finding her beloved friend, even after years of discouraging separation, emphasizes the strength of their emotional bond. What's more, in putting so much energy towards looking for lost family members, Li-ling keeps with the tradition of staying connected to each other—especially since she's using *The Book of Records* as a tool to find Ai-ming—that many members of her family have done for generations. The final line in the novel, "not everything will pass," gestures at how important keeping a record of family experiences are. It is as though Li-ling is simultaneously committing to living her own life without depending on her family members for happiness while also recognizing that keeping their stories alive is an act of love and deep importance.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Li-ling's father, Jiang Kai, left her family twice in the span of a single year. The first time, he left Li-ling's mother; the second time, he took his own life. Li-ling was 10 years old when her father died, and now, as an adult, she has few memories of her father. She does recall that in life, her father had a "handsome, ageless face," and that although he was kind, he had an air of sadness about him. It was only after her father's death that Li-ling discovered he was a renowned pianist in China— in light of that, she remembers how her father was always tapping his fingers on the countertop or tickling her and her mother.

When Li-ling was in her twenties, she lost her mother too. The grief Li-ling experienced propelled her to focus only on her work. Now, as a mathematician, she often spends the entire day buried in the world of numbers, which helps her to keep her feelings of grief and loneliness at bay. Still, sometimes Li-ling is overcome by emotion when something reminds her of either parent: she recalls that in 2010, she was walking through Vancouver's Chinatown when she passed a **music** store playing Bach's Sonata for Piano and Violin No. 4. Though Li-ling's pianist father had been dead for 20 years at that point, the memories the music inspired in her were so overwhelming that she became dizzy.

Back in 1989, right after Li-ling's father commits suicide, the political situation in his home country, China, is tense. Li-ling's mother obsessively watches CNN, which broadcasts news about the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. On June 4th, Li-ling's father has already left her mother. It is the day after the massacre at Tiananmen Square, and Li-ling's mother weeps uncontrollably. In October, two police officers arrive at the family's door in Canada to inform them that Kai has died by suicide. At this point, "quiet (qù) be[comes] another person living inside [their house]. It [sleeps] in [her] father's shirts, trousers and shoes, it guard[s] his Beethoven."

Thien begins the story with a story of loss, abandonment, and family separation. This sets readers up to explore extensively the theme of family's isolation from one another throughout the novel. Additionally, the fact that Li-ling knew so little about her father when he was alive sets readers up for a story in which uncovering family histories and learning more about family members' identities becomes a central theme.



Here, the fact that Li-ling is unable to distract herself from her emotional suffering through work demonstrates the importance of understanding family connection in the novel. Although she tries to forget everything that has happened, the grief she feels around having been separated from both of her parents remains powerful even after years of trying to overcome it. Additionally, the fact that music is what inspires such a strong emotional response in Li-ling highlights music's importance and its power as a form of creative, emotional expression.



In this moment, Thien highlights Li-ling and her mother's isolation. As migrants in Canada, they are not connected to community, Kai's absence isolates them completely. Thien skillfully links Li-ling's mother's grief about Tiananmen Square with the moment in which she learns that she has lost her husband. This invites readers to consider that the political situation in China may be why Li-ling's family migrated in the first place, thus becoming a factor in their isolation.



Following Li-ling's father's death, her mother goes about collecting the bits and pieces leftover from his life. Every day, it seems, she finds more and more paper—**musical** scores, letters written but unsent, and many notebooks. Slowly, the collection of papers grows so large that the entire dining room table is covered with archives from Kai's life. In March 1990, Li-ling's mother shows her one of the longest documents her father left over: **The Book of Records**. She thinks it's a novel but she isn't certain; the book is about an adventurer named Da-wei who takes a journey to America, and another named May Fourth who gets lost in the Gobi Desert. Li-ling is curious to know the story, but her mother sends her off to bed instead of explaining further.

In bed, Li-ling thinks of her father and of the life he has left Li-ling and her mother to lead in Canada. Although Li-ling is often sad at home, she thinks to herself that she is very different in her fifth grade class: where she is a successful, well-liked student. She also considers that "in poorer countries, people like Ma and [her] would not be so lonely."

Finally, Li-ling wonders to herself her father didn't care enough about her to stay alive. When she wakes up in the middle of the night, her mother is sitting on her bed, wiping the tears off her face—Li-ling never cries while she's awake, only while she's asleep.

One day in early December, Li-ling's mother receives a 30-page letter from Shanghai. As she reads with the aid of a dictionary (Li-ling's mother was educated in traditional Cantonese calligraphy, while the new Chinese government mandates that everyone use the simplified script), she begins to cry. The letter is from a woman who is "like family"—the author's husband was Li-ling's father's teacher at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, but the two lost touch "during the difficult years." In fact, Li-ling was named after the author of the letter, who has written to say that her daughter, Ai-Ming, has arrived in Toronto but she can't use her passport. Ai-Ming has nowhere to go and she needs Li-ling's mother's help. Ai-ming, according to the letter, was involved in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, and she had to flee the country. Li-ling's mother agrees to help Ai-Ming and she sends her money for a bus ticket to Vancouver.

In this passage, Thien describes how Kai's documents slowly take over the dining table in the family's house. The dining table is a central meeting place in family life, and the fact that it is covered in documents from a dead family member's files demonstrates how important it is for Li-ling and her mother to understand Kai's history, even though he is gone. The documents serve to tell the story, in bits and fragments, of Kai's life. The documents' placement in the middle of the house highlights the importance of preserving family stories and connections, even after death.



Here, Thien highlights the ways in which migration has isolated Li-ling and her mother from being able to participate in loving community. Her reference to "poorer countries" plays with the assumption that these are places migrants would likely want to escape from in order to live in more developed countries, like Canada. However, Li-ling herself is descended from a "poorer country" and yet the isolation she experiences as a migrant, in her 10-year-old mind, outweighs the potential challenges of living in a less wealthy nation.



Here, Thien again draws readers' attention to Li-ling's grief at having lost her father. The fact that she is only able to cry when she is asleep suggests that the grief she feels about this loss is too heavy for her to process while she is awake, which further emphasizes the power of her feelings of loss, abandonment, and sorrow.



In this moment, Thien tells a story that highlights how China's political climate isolated communities from one another, and yet how, in spite of this environment, people were able to forge meaningful, lasting bonds anyway. The fact that Li-ling's father lost touch with a close friend during "difficult years" speaks to the severity with which the Chinese government acted in ways that harmed its citizens, creating policies that isolated people from one another. However, the fact that years later, the same friend's wife would feel comfortable reaching out to Kai's wife goes to show the strength of the bond that originally existed between the two men. This, in turn, demonstrates community resilience in the face of political movements that seek to separate people from one another.



When Ai-Ming arrives, Li-ling observes that she has never met a “real” Chinese girl before—one from the mainland. Li-ling’s mother instructs Li-ling to take Ai-Ming’s coat, and Li-ling realizes that she and her mother’s “lives [have] contracted to such a degree that [she cannot] remember the last time a stranger [has] entered [their] home.” In preparation for the visit, Li-ling’s mother has hidden all of the documents her husband left behind under the table.

At dinner that night, Ai-ming shares her story with her hosts. As she speaks about leaving China, her hands shake. Sometimes she still dreams that none of this has happened, that she is still in China able to take care of her struggling mother. Ai-ming admits that she doesn’t even have a passport—her only hope is to try to get into the United States, where the government has offered amnesty for Chinese students after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

It isn’t long before Ai-ming discovers the boxes of paper under the dining table and she becomes curious about them. Li-ling observes that Ai-ming, raised in China, can read every character of Li-ling’s father’s diary—while Li-ling can hardly make out anything. One day, after reading some of Li-ling’s father’s journal, Ai-ming tells Li-ling that *The Book of Records* is written in Ai-ming’s father, Sparrow’s, handwriting. Suddenly, Ai-Ming is overcome with emotion about the loss of her father, who she says was a talented musician who “gave up his talent so that he could protect [her].” Even though her father was a good and honest person, Ai-ming says that “they killed him as if he were an animal.” If her father were alive, she says, she wouldn’t be so alone. She breaks down crying, and Li-ling, also overwhelmed, leaves the room.

Soon after, Ai-ming comes to Li-ling’s room and apologizes for having read her father’s journal. She tries to tell Li-ling about how Li-ling’s father, Jiang Kai, once came to visit Ai-ming and her family in their village. But Li-ling doesn’t want to talk about her father at all—in fact, she declares that she never wants to hear his name again. Instead, she pulls out **The Book of Records** and she asks Ai-ming to read it to her. Ai-ming doesn’t want to, but Li-ling persists. Ai-ming tells Li-ling that she reminds her of herself when Ai-ling used to badger her grandmother, Big Mother Knife, into doing things she didn’t want to do.

Ai-ming is presented as an antidote to Li-ling and her mother’s suffering and isolation. Indeed, not only is she another person entering the home, she is a person from China who has come to stay with them. In other words, not only does she fulfill their basic need for human connection, but she also fulfills their need to be connected to their country, and, by extension, their cultural community and ancestry.



Ai-ming’s story of having been persecuted as a student during the Tiananmen Square massacre highlights how the Chinese government persecuted people for expressing individual opinions. At a young age, Ai-ming is already a political refugee due to her country’s policies of repressing freedom of speech. Her desperation—evidenced by the fact that she left even without a passport—implies that the extent of the government’s political oppression is extreme.



In this moment, Ai-ming again serves as someone who can link Li-ling to her ancestral Chinese culture and, consequently, her own heritage. While Li-ling herself would never be able to understand the documents her father left behind, Ai-ming can, and therefore serves as the character who initiates Li-ling into the act of uncovering family stories and preserving them. Additionally, Ai-ming’s mention that Sparrow had to give up his music—an integral part of his identity—to protect her highlights the ways in which expression of individual identity was impossible at the time Ai-ming was raised.



*This moment in the story is highly ironic. By burying herself in mathematics, the adult Li-ling replicates denial that her younger self expresses surrounding understanding family history and working through the grief that is part of that process. However, Li-ling tries to distract herself by asking Ai-ming to read *The Book of Records* to her—little does she know that *The Book of Records* will prove to be nothing other than a record of her family’s history, connecting her to the very stories that she is trying to avoid. In this moment, then, Thien emphasizes that dealing with family history is not only important, but possibly inevitable—in spite of all of Li-ling’s efforts to avoid it, she ends up diving straight into family stories.*



Big Mother Knife, Ai-ming says, is a ferocious character—so strong and aggressive that even when she was a child, everyone would treat her very seriously. Big Mother Knife and her sister, Swirl, used to perform as singers and storytellers in their local region, traveling from village to village. Swirl and Big Mother Knife came of age in a time of great instability—“a time of chaos, of bombs and floods, when love songs streamed from the **radios** and wept down the streets.” At that time, “**music** sustained weddings, births, rituals, work, marching, boredom, confrontation and death; music and stories, even in times like these, were a refuge, a passport, everywhere.”

Indeed, during those times, one’s village could be ruled one day by Nationalists and the next day by Communists. Big Mother Knife gives birth during those years to a baby boy, Sparrow. She raises Sparrow on the road as a traveling musician, and by the time Sparrow is five he is performing heartbreaking love songs to audiences who can’t resist. One day on the road, they pass a group of blind musicians, led by a young girl who could see but must have been eight or nine years old. Shocked, Sparrow asks his mother how the group could avoid the warplanes when they come. His mother tells him that it’s likely these blind musicians won’t survive long. Still, this group is one of the only memories Sparrow retains of the war when he is older.

As all across China death and destruction plague millions, Big Mother Knife drills into Sparrow the importance of **music**. In spite of all of the hardship, she trusts that as long as she and her son give people music, they won’t be abandoned. “Without the musician, all life would be loneliness,” she tells her young son. And, with everything Sparrow has seen in the war, even at a young age, he knows well what loneliness is.

Soon after, Chairman Mao declares victory for the Communists in Tiananmen Square, declaring that China will be a new, Communist society. Big Mother Knife is so happy that she gives Sparrow a bone-crushing hug and enough candies to make him dizzy. The next day, Big Mother Knife takes Sparrow back on the road, but this time they’re going home to Shanghai.

Here, Thien introduces storytelling as an important tool not only for preserving family history, as it has been until now, but also as a tool for resilience under politically challenging circumstances. Music appears, through Big Mother Knife and Swirl’s work as performers, as an antidote to the violence, grief, and oppression that the Chinese people were suffering under their government. Through casting music in this framework, Thien highlights the importance of creative expression not just for individual fulfillment, but for the wellness of entire communities.



Here, Thien juxtaposes music with political ideology. She casts political ideologies as relatively inconsistent and short-lived—the villages are constantly changing hands between supporters of different parties, for instance. On the other hand, she casts music as resilient through the image of the musicians who, all blind, manage to survive a great part even though the only person leading them is a child. Not only do the musicians manage to survive the war, they also manage to survive in Sparrow’s memory, which itself is surprising, as one might imagine that memories of violence and suffering would take precedence over music in a child’s recollection of wartime. Thien’s choice to privilege music’s survival in fact and in memory underscores its power as an art form.



In this moment, Thien gives further attention to music and its importance. Big Mother Knife depicts music as an antidote to loneliness, which suggests that people need to feel connected to art or creative expression in order to feel whole. This again drives home the importance of creative expression in the novel. What’s more, the fact that Sparrow has such a deep understanding of loneliness at such a young age highlights the violence of the political situation he grew up in and the way that political violence separates and destroys communities.



Here, Mao’s victory seems significant to Big Mother Knife not because she necessarily agrees with his ideology, but because the war ending means that she can finally go home. This again emphasizes how war and political instability disconnect people from what is most important to them: family and community.



In Shanghai, Sparrow and Big Mother Knife meet Sparrow's father, Ba Lute, who has been fighting with the Communists. Now that the Communists have won, Ba Lute—bald, tall, enormously strong, and constantly smoking cigarettes—is a revolutionary hero. Thanks to his dedication to the Party, Ba Lute and his family get to live in a large, two-story home near the Conservatory. Their neighbors are a couple who lost all three of their revolutionary sons in the war. Ba Lute directs his family to paint “Trust the Party in Everything” on the brick wall they share with the couple.

Big Mother Knife, although separated from Ba Lute for many years, isn't as glad to be reunited with him as she expected to be. Now, in addition to being bald, Ba Lute is the “king of slogans” and insists on things like wearing “humble straw” shoes rather than regular cloth. What's more, Big Mother Knife has been assigned an administrative position at the Shanghai No. 2 Electric Wire Company, where she has to endure political meetings twice a day. These meetings are “so endless and excruciating she want[s] to stick her fingers in the sockets.” But Sparrow, now 11, enjoys his father's company, chiefly because Ba Lute tutors Sparrow in **music** theory as well as regular schoolwork. Soon, Big Mother Knife gives birth to two more sons, Da Shan and Flying Bear, who take after their father more in his political commitment than in his work as a musician.

CHAPTER 2

In February of 1991 in Canada, Ai-ming has been living with Li-ling and her mother for two months. One day, Ai-ming and Li-ling hear a symphony on the **radio**, and Ai-ming shares with Li-ling that when she was young, there were only a few pieces of “approved **music**” that played on the radio in China. These were the “revolutionary operas.” But, Ai-ming says, she and her father often listened to “illegal music.” Li-ling is surprised at this and asks, “But, Ai-ming, how can *music* be illegal?”

Thien's mention that Ba Lute and his family get to live in a nice house to reward Ba Lute for his work as a revolutionary draws readers' attention to the way the Communist government treats class. Although, ideologically, everyone should have access to equally high-quality housing under Communism, the Party's choice to favor its allies tells a different story and suggests their own hypocrisy. Ba Lute's insistence on writing the slogan on the wall is the first introduction of propaganda in the novel, and implies that he may want to continue benefitting from the privileges of being favored by the Party by openly demonstrating his support.



Thien characterizes Big Mother Knife as more independent than her husband in this passage. While Ba Lute seems to be the embodiment of the Communist Party itself—speaking only in slogans to the extent that his personal idea and opinions, Thien implies, are hidden—Big Mother Knife grows bored of consistent discussion about Communist policies and beliefs. Indeed, Thien's choice to show how annoyed Big Mother Knife becomes at her workplace's political meetings emphasizes the extent to which Mao's Communist Party immersed the Chinese people in propaganda.



Here, Thien introduces readers to yet another way in which the Chinese government sought to impart propaganda to the people. The fact that they tried to make even classical music—which has no lyrics and, therefore, arguably cannot communicate a direct message—propagandistic demonstrates the extremism with which Mao went about spreading Communist ideology. Li-ling highlights the tension between creative expression and propaganda in the novel when she asks how music can be illegal.



Ai-ming continues, sharing that after the Shanghai Conservatory was shut down, Sparrow, who used to work there, began working in a factory that made **radios**. Still, Ai-ming would always hear Sparrow humming, and she realized later that the **music** was what was left of her father's own scores. Sometimes, Ai-ming would sing the songs she knew were illegal just to wake up Big Mother Knife and get her attention. Ai-ming always wanted Big Mother Knife to tell her stories, and occasionally, after much pestering, the old woman obliged her granddaughter. Once, Big Mother Knife told Ai-Ming the love story of her sister, Swirl, and Wen the Dreamer.

Back when the war has just ended, Wen the Dreamer lives in a small village. Born to a prosperous family, his grandfather had been selected in 1872 to go study in America. He went to Yale, studied engineering, and worked at the Shanghai Armory for 10 years before dying of consumption. Luckily, Wen's grandfather's brothers knew how to fend for themselves and acquired they dozens of acres of land to provide for their family once their brother had passed away. Although Wen's mother wanted him to take after his uncles and become a landowner, Wen had other ideas—he was more interested in poetry than property. When the war began, Wen's poetic spirit made it hard for him to endure the cruelty. Although in Wen's village of Bingpai there was the "worst famine in a century," Wen never experienced hunger due to his wealthy family.

One day, Wen goes to a teahouse and sees Swirl singing. He is captivated by her voice, which to him is transcendental. Later that month, Swirl receives a package postmarked to her but with no return address: in it are the finely-copied pages of a novel which traces two characters, Da-wei and May Fourth, as they navigate the fall of the Chinese Empire. The selection begins and ends midsentence, but a new chapter arrives every few days.

After the 31st chapter arrives, Swirl doesn't receive any more packages in the mail. She has come to love the story, telling Big Mother Knife about the enthralling adventures of Da-wei and May Fourth. Big Mother Knife worries about the fact that the packages are anonymous and she asks Swirl if she thinks this might be a political trap. Meanwhile, at the teahouse where Swirl performs, rumors circulate wildly. People worry that Chairman Mao will denounce teahouses as "bourgeois frivolities" and that he will monitor the lyrics of each and every song. But Swirl can only think about the mysterious novel and she searches all of Shanghai to find it. One day, she goes to the Old Cat's bookstore and discovers that someone else, Wen the Dreamer, is also looking for further installments of the story of Da-wei and May Fourth.

The fact that Sparrow goes from being a classical musician to working in a factory that makes radios further highlights the tension between creative expression and propaganda. Radios are essentially tools through which the government can spread its propaganda to the people in China, while classical music is one of the few ways in which Sparrow and others were able to creatively express themselves. The fact that Sparrow continues humming his own music even after having his right to creative expression repressed suggests the resilience of his creative and artistic spirit in spite of the political repression and propaganda that seek to drown it out.



While this passage doesn't address class during China's communist era, it does paint a portrait of the type of class inequality that preexisted Mao's regime and which the Communist Party sought to destroy. Wen the Dreamer's wealth sets him entirely apart from the rest of his village—although people around him were literally starving to death, his wealth protected him from facing the same fate. This suggests extreme class inequality, and a lack of interest among the wealthy classes to support or assist the working classes.



Here, Wen the Dreamer's choice to woo Swirl by sending her chapters of a book speak to art and storytelling not only as tools that link one generation of a family with the past, but also as things that serve to connect people with one another and help them to develop relationships.



Big Mother Knife's concerns that the story could be a "political trap" give readers an idea of how strong censorship was in Communist China at that time. Although the book Swirl is receiving seems to be an innocuous novel, Big Mother Knife's concern implies that literature and other forms of art are so persecuted by the contemporary government that reading a novel could get Swirl in political trouble. Indeed, the threats to close the teahouses—which, to most readers, are innocuous places for community building and artistic expression—emphasize the government's extreme repression of creative and artistic expression.



Swirl goes to the Old Cat's bookshop every day but doesn't find the novel. One day, she meets Wen the Dreamer there—he is looking for the same book. She discovers that Wen the Dreamer has copied the book—called **The Book of Records**—by hand but he is not the original storyteller. He has been sending Swirl the chapters of the book because he thought she would like them, but when he started sending them he didn't realize the novel was unfinished. Dismayed, Wen has tried to write his own installments, but unfortunately—in the Old Cat's words—he doesn't have the level of talent. "You'd be amazed at how few people can tell a story," the Old Cat continues, "Yet still these new emperors want to ban them [...] Don't they know how hard it is to come by pleasure? Or perhaps they do know. The sly goats."

Soon after they meet, Wen the Dreamer asks Swirl to be his wife, saying, "Our country is about to be born. Let us, too, have the chance to begin again." Swirl accepts his proposal.

Here, Thien illustrates the importance of storytelling in two ways. First, the excerpts from The Book of Records are so compelling that they have succeeded in drawing two people together—Swirl and Wen meet because they are both obsessed with the story. Secondly, the Old Cat's quote suggests that she believes that storytelling is such an important source of pleasure for people that the government, recognizing its power, seeks to limit people's access to it. Her choice to call the Communist Party "new emperors" suggest that she is cynical about the new form of government and might not feel as liberated as the Communist Party would want its people to feel.



Wen the Dreamer believes that the country's ability to begin again will correlate with his ability to do so as an individual, suggesting that he has faith that Communist rule will be beneficial to his ability to build the life he wants for himself and his future family. Individual identity and communism are not yet at odds in this moment for him.



CHAPTER 3

Back in Canada, Ai-ming suddenly asks Li-ling whether she's disappeared. "I'm sure I've disappeared," she tells her younger friend. "Have I? Can you *really* see me?" she asks. At first, Li-ling is frightened by Ai-ming's question, but soon she sees that for Ai-ming, disappearance is desirable; Li-ling observes that the older girl needs "to live unobserved." Li-ling's mother now works two jobs to cover expenses for Ai-ming. Li-ling, in turn, has decided to use her lucky New Year's money to treat Ai-ming to dinner at Li-ling's father's favorite restaurant. There, Ai-ming tells Li-ling that "solitude can reshape your life," and she confesses that she feels she needs to leave Li-ling and her mother's home to try to get amnesty in the United States.

Li-ling is curious about what happened in Tiananmen Square that caused Ai-ming to need to leave China. That day at the restaurant, Li-ling finds the courage to ask Ai-ming to tell her the story of the riots. Ai-ming tells Li-ling about how she and her best friend, Yiwen, slept beside each other in the square. For Ai-ming, during the time of the demonstrations, China felt like home for the first time. She felt understood, she tells Li-ling. But after the massacre, and after Sparrow was murdered, Ai-ming understood that she could never go back to China.

Here, Ai-ming's desire to be invisible may stem from the fact that she grew up in Communist China, where every word or action could be used against her to say that she was a political enemy. In other words, Ai-ming's desire not to be seen is at its core a desire to be able to fully express herself individually without the judgement or scrutiny of others. At the same time, the fact that she will be unable to get amnesty in Canada means that she needs to go to the United States, which will separate her from Li-ling and her mother, leading to all three women's isolation from family and cultural connection.



Ai-ming's mention that she first felt at home in China during the Tiananmen Square riots implies that she needs the ability to sincerely express her opinion—as she and Yiwen did at Tiananmen Square—in order to feel that she truly belongs to a place. Because the government chose to politically oppress the students and deny them freedom of speech, Ai-ming has had to leave the country—not only is it unsafe, but it is implied that she can't live in such a repressive society.



On their way home, Ai-ming tells Li-ling that she will always consider her family—Li-ling will always be her little sister. Once home, Ai-ming makes tea and the two girls lie in the dark together. Ai-ming continues reading to Li-ling from **The Book of Records**, which, this time, is not “a recapitulation of those thirty-one notebooks, but a life much closer to [Li-ling’s] own. A story that contain[s] [her] history and [will] contain [her] future.”

At Swirl and Wen the Dreamer’s wedding in Bingpai, singers and booksellers come from Shanghai to gift the newlywed couple with **musical** instruments and books copied by hand. Swirl is to move to Bingpai and live in Wen the Dreamer’s family home. During this time, Swirl gives birth to a daughter, Zhuli, who sings all the time. Meanwhile, Big Mother Knife’s home is also full of music: her oldest child, Sparrow, is constantly listening to and transcribing Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*.

Ba Lute, meanwhile, seems to be doing more political work than teaching at the Conservatory. He is organizing a land reform campaign that requires him to be out of Shanghai often—he even goes on a six-month trip to the countryside. When he returns, Big Mother Knife comments wryly that she thought the war ended in 1949. He responds that the Chairman has launched a new campaign and he asks her if that doesn’t make her feel excited. Big Mother Knife responds, “Oh, good. A new campaign. As Chairman Mao says, ‘After all the enemies with guns have been wiped out, there will still be the enemies without guns.’”

Big Mother Knife decides that she’s going to go visit Swirl in the countryside. Ba Lute tries to persuade her against it, telling her that there’s a war going on in rural China and the trip isn’t safe at this time. Big Mother Knife insists despite her husband’s protests, and ultimately she embarks on the 19-hour journey to Bingpai to visit her sister.

When Big Mother Knife arrives in Bingpai, she is surprised at what she sees. The village, once prosperous, is now “bedraggled and ugly.” She trudges up the hill to Wen the Dreamer’s family home, and there she is so shocked that she’s sure her driver has the wrong address: the courtyard is missing its gate and the place is covered in trash. Big Mother Knife thinks to herself that the house looks like it’s going to be torn down. As she enters, she sees dozens of village people scurrying about the property and removing the house’s floors. When Big Mother Knife asks one of the women where the family is, the woman responds that they were “thrown out. Executed like criminals.”

In this moment, the connection between The Book of Records and Li-ling’s family history becomes clear. It isn’t just an entertaining novel; it’s a book in which dedicated family members have chosen to preserve the family’s story for generations to come.



Here, the proliferation of musical instruments and books as gifts at Wen and Swirl’s wedding highlights how important the arts and creative expression are to them as a couple. Indeed, they pass their love of music on to their daughter, making music something that ties the family together.



Big Mother Knife’s statement at the end of the passage is ominous. Mao’s insistence upon wiping out enemies without guns implies that he intends to persecute people who are not violently fighting back, which is inarguably a form of political oppression. Then juxtaposes Ba Lute’s increasing involvement in the Communist Party with his decreasing involvement in teaching at the Conservatory. Again, in this moment, music and political involvement are directly at odds with each other.



Here, Big Mother Knife chooses to risk her safety in order to visit her sister. In spite of the political violence that would keep her apart, she is choosing to see her own sister and maintain a strong relationship with her in spite of the violence she may experience along the way.



Here, Big Mother Knife discovers that Wen the Dreamer’s village has rampaged his family home because they were wealthy. This moment introduces readers to the way that the Communist government treats class—working people have the right to reclaim the property of the rich and even punish them for their crimes of class oppression with death. The fact that Wen’s family have been executed suggests that the class reform under communism isn’t just about achieving equality, but also about getting revenge.



Distraught, Big Mother Knife goes outside and remembers Ba Lute's warning that there is a war going on in the countryside. Meanwhile, down on the main road in the village, the people are gathering in a demonstration. The crowd is screaming, and Big Mother Knife makes out words like "stand up," "have courage," and "devil." She sees that Wen the Dreamer is at the head of the procession, followed by Swirl, who has her arms tied with ropes behind her back. Big Mother Knife follows the procession until it ends and the villagers have drifted off, leaving Wen and Swirl alone. Finally, Big Mother Knife approaches Swirl, and asks if that's really her.

At first, Swirl is unwilling to explain what has happened. She calls the demonstrations "struggle sessions" and she says they're harmless—most of the time. She, Wen the Dreamer, and their daughter Zhuli are staying in a hut on the outskirts of town. Even so far from the village, everyone in the house "[speaks] in whispers, as if afraid to wake the gods of destiny, or even Chairman Mao himself."

One night, as the sisters are lying in bed with Zhuli, Swirl asks Big Mother Knife to tell her a story to distract her from the pain of having been evicted and tormented by the villagers. Big Mother Knife shares with her younger sister that she visited an old teahouse where they used to perform. Previously known as the Purple Mountain Teahouse, after the revolution it was renamed the Red Mountain People's Refreshment House. What's more, the songs have changed: popular favorites include "The East is Red" and "Song of the Guerrillas."

Swirl then asks her sister if she remembers **The Book of Records**. Big Mother Knife replies that she hopes Swirl has burned the book, but Swirl reveals that she hasn't—in fact, the book, along with many others, is hidden underground at Wen the Dreamer's family property. Swirl intends to go back to the house to get *The Book of Records*, but Big Mother Knife tries to dissuade her.

Big Mother Knife gently asks why there is so much upheaval and cruelty going on in the village. Swirl responds that she understands "why nothing can stay the same," as "once everything is broken, they can build society once more." Swirl doesn't seem too worried about the Communist agenda, except for one thing—Zhuli has been born "into the wrong class." Because of this, Swirl worries that she may not be able to protect her daughter.

In this moment, Big Mother Knife sees a violent demonstration aimed at torturing and humiliating Wen and Swirl for being class oppressors. The violence that the villagers have chosen to subject them to highlights their vengefulness. The fact that they call Wen and Swirl devils also implies that there is an element of extremism to their communist values. The fact that Big Mother Knife has to ask her sister if that's really her suggests that the violence Swirl has experienced has changed her greatly.



Swirl's refusal to complain about the "struggle sessions" suggests that she is afraid of being heard criticizing the Communist Party. She chooses to censor herself for fear of subjecting herself and her family to further punishment for voicing disagreement with the Communist Party's beliefs.



Again, Thien demonstrates the extreme extent to which Mao's government seeks to censor its citizens freedom of expression and to use every opportunity possible to spread communist propaganda. While previously the teahouses were apolitical spaces where people went to have fun, now they have been turned into vehicles for the Party to spread its message and immerse the people of China in propaganda.



Swirl's commitment to The Book of Records demonstrates a kind of courage. Although she knows she could get in trouble for having the book, she values literature and art to such an extent that she is willing to risk severe punishment for having the novel in her possession.



Swirl's insistence on backing up the communist agenda again implies that the government's oppression is so strong that even those persecuted by communism feel unable to speak out against it. Additionally, her statement that Zhuli has been born into the "wrong class" suggests that hierarchical structures in society remain powerful under communism. The people aren't equal—the only difference is who's on top and who's on the bottom. In this case, the formerly rich are punished with low class status.



Only years later does Big Mother Knife finally piece together what happened to Swirl and Wen the Dreamer after they were kicked out of their home. Wen's uncles were tending to their fields when a group from the Communist Party arrived at the gate. Da Ge, Wen's oldest uncle, answered the door, inviting the strangers in for something to eat. They refused, saying the Ba Ge and his brothers needed to come to a village meeting. "Of course, as your family is so prominent in Bingpai, how could we start the meeting without you?" the party members asked.

Once Wen the Dreamer, Da Ge and his brothers arrived at the school, they saw Swirl and Zhuli kneeling with 20 other villagers on the stage. Villagers were kicking and slapping Da Ge's wife, who cried for mercy. Once Wen the Dreamer was placed on the side alongside his family members, the villagers began their accusations. One man shouted that during a difficult financial time, he had sold his land to Da Ge "for nothing." When Da Ge tried to defend himself, saying that it was a fair price, the crowd became furious. Another woman accused Da Ge's brother of raping her when she was a child. Someone handed her a shovel and she beat him "even after it made no difference."

The crowd became increasingly belligerent the more accusations were heaped upon Wen the Dreamer, Da Ge, and their family. Soon, the villagers in charge took out guns, and Swirl thought she was hallucinating. All of Wen's uncles were shot and killed, but Wen himself was spared.

Big Mother Knife does not find out about any of this until years later. But the fourth night that she is in Bingpai, just after Zhuli, Wen the Dreamer, and Swirl have been forced to live in the hut, Big Mother Knife is unable to sleep. Thinking of a poem that she recited at her sister's wedding, Big Mother Knife resolves to go to the family's former property and try to get **The Book of Records**. Afraid of being caught, she "pause[s] to offer a poem to the God of Literature" before entering: "When the mind is exalted / the body is lightened / and feels as if it could float in the wind. / This city is famed as a center of letters; / and all you writers coming here / prove that the name of a great land / is made by better things than wealth," she recites.

In this moment, the Communist Party leaders who arrive at Da Ge's house are subtly mocking him by speaking about his importance. He doesn't know that the Party intends to punish him precisely for having this "prominence." Their mockery of Da Ge's high social status speaks to their desire to upend the hierarchical system that formerly granted the wealthy social and economic power over the poor.



In this moment, Wen the Dreamer's family is being publicly tortured. The violence with which the villagers treat them suggests that they aren't able to recognize the family's humanity. The fact that Wen's family formerly was wealthy is so infuriating to the villagers that they feel empowered to brutalize them. Indeed, the woman's choice to continue beating Da Ge's brother even when he was already dead shows how she was motivated by a desire for vengeance more than to live in an equal and just society.



Again, Thien draws readers' attention to the extreme political violence that Wen and his family are subjected to. The villagers do not present Wen's family with an opportunity to reform themselves. To the villagers, the solution to class inequality lies in violence.



In this moment, the poem Big Mother Knife recites creates separation between art and wealth. While she fears that Swirl could be punished for having The Book of Records precisely because literature is considered to be bourgeois, in the poem, Big Mother Knife isolates artistic expression from wealth—she says that letters are worth more than wealth. By having Big Mother Knife recite this poem, Thien helps highlight the illogical nature of associating the arts with the upper classes.



Big Mother Knife finds **The Book of Records** inside the hiding place that Swirl described to her in the house. Upon leaving, she thinks to herself that all of Wen the Dreamer's family's possessions will, one day, turn to dust. "Expect," she thinks, for *The Book of Records*, "which would go on to another hiding place, to live a further existence."

The next morning, Big Mother Knife catches the bus back to Shanghai. By chance, she sits beside a young woman whose husband is Bingpai's deputy village head. Big Mother Knife senses the opportunity to help her sister and she shares with the young woman that her husband, Ba Lute, is well-known within the Party. She tells the deputy head's wife that Ba Lute is extremely fond of Wen the Dreamer. Over the course of the 14-hour bus ride, the two women continue chatting and they form a friendship.

When Big Mother Knife arrives at home, her family is in disarray. The **radio** is blaring. Ba Lute explains that "some of [their] interests—a few **musical** interests—do not need to be broadcast." Indeed, when Big Mother Knife finds her son, Sparrow, he is listening to Bach's *Goldberg Variations* softly, trying to transcribe it. He has been spending his time doing this for fun since Big Mother Knife left town.

CHAPTER 4

In Canada, Li-ling has been dreaming about **The Book of Records**. Ai-ming wakes her up gently. Today, Ai-ming is going to try to cross over into the United States. Li-ling is sorry to see Ai-ming go but she knows that there is no other way: Li-ling's mother doesn't have the financial resources necessary to support Ai-ming indefinitely, and Canada does not have amnesty for Chinese nationals.

Back in Shanghai, decades ago, Big Mother Knife has fallen ill after her trip to Bingpai. Luckily, Sparrow is reading **The Book of Records** to her, which helps her pass the time. In it, the character Da-wei has become trapped in the Gobi Desert at an abandoned **radio** station. From there, Da-wei imagines listeners and he makes up letters from them each day to read aloud on his imaginary radio show.

Big Mother Knife's thoughts in this moment speak to her belief in the resilience of storytelling and artistic expression. She has risked so much to get The Book of Records from the hiding place precisely because she agrees with her sister that storytelling and literature are valuable and need to be preserved for future generations.



Here, Thien again highlights the hypocrisy that underlies the communist understanding of class. What Big Mother Knife is doing in this moment is networking, using her high social status to connect with another socially powerful person who she thinks can help her sister. That she is able to network in this way underscores the fact that the new communist society is not equal in any way, and instead has a rigid social hierarchy,



In this moment, the radio appears as the performance of communist ideology. It is clear that Ba Lute thinks listening to Bach could be seen as counter-revolutionary, so he covers it up with the radio, which likely is blasting propaganda through the house. In this way, he uses propaganda to disguise the fact that his son is creatively expressing himself through music.



Ai-ming leaving Li-ling and her mother's home is another example of the ways in which adverse political situations isolate people from one another. Now, it is not China's policies but Canada's lack of accessibility to immigrants that causes loved ones to need to live separately from one another.



In The Book of Records, Da-wei uses the radio just as the other characters engage with The Book of Records: as a way to tell stories and communicate with loved ones. Based on the way the radio has been used in the novel up until this point—as a way to disguise free, creative expression—readers may be able to guess that Da-wei's messages to "imaginary" listeners may be more than that and may contain a real message that he intends to share.



Sparrow is reading Da-wei's story to Big Mother Knife when there is a knock on the door. Outside, a small girl is standing with a plastic bag containing clothes, a towel, and two records. She asks Sparrow to tell her "Aunt Mother Knife" that she is here. Big Mother Knife had already come out into the courtyard to investigate and she pulls the little girl, Zhuli, into her arms. "Where's your mother?" she asks Zhuli.

Later that night, Big Mother Knife receives a letter addressed to her under the door, informing her that Wen the Dreamer and Swirl have been convicted of counter-revolutionary crimes and have been transported to separate "re-education camps" in the far-away Northwest. Big Mother Knife is so shocked that she feels she can't comprehend the letter. Ba Lute, on the other hand, is calm. "Sometimes the local revolutionary committee gets carried away," he says. "I'll take care of it." That night, Big Mother Knife is so worried about Swirl that she cannot sleep. Her sister is the great love of her life, she thinks to herself, crying. She wonders what a counter-revolutionary crime even is—she has never heard of one before.

Ba Lute, meanwhile, embarks for Bingpai that same night. Through the bus window, he sees countless banners with revolutionary slogans like "Serve the People!" and "Dare to think, dare to act!"

When Ba Lute arrives in Bingpai the next day, he heads straight to the Party office. Surprisingly, there is an electric fan on the ceiling to keep the place cool, powered by the office's very own generator. The grinning village head welcomes Ba Lute with a "very large piece of cake." But when Ba Lute asks after Wen the Dreamer and Swirl, wanting to know where they are, the official becomes nervous.

After much hesitation and beating around the bush, the official finally reveals to Ba Lute that Wen the Dreamer and Swirl have already been sent to the re-education camps in the Northwest. Ba Lute is surprised, as he predicted that they wouldn't have left yet. The official explains that Wen and Swirl's crime was having a "hidden cellar" on the family land. Ba Lute tells the official that a hidden cellar is not a crime, but the official continues, saying that "contraband" was found inside of the cellar—"books, records, some valuable heirlooms [...] the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History*." The official, changing his tone, comments that he is surprised Ba Lute did not know. Meanwhile, Swirl is a "convicted rightist and shameless bourgeois element." Both husband and wife will receive "re-education through hard labor."

In this moment, Zhuli arrives at Big Mother Knife's house. At the age of six, she has already been isolated from her parents and has had to travel to a distant city. The Communist Party's political practices have separated her from her mother and father.



Here, Thien exposes readers to the way in which the Chinese government uses family separation as a punishment for not agreeing with the government's policies. They have separated parents from children and spouses from one another. Another element worth noting here is that Ba Lute, due to his high position in the Party, feels that he can intervene on his in-laws' behalf. His sense of social privilege demonstrates the lack of genuine class equality under Mao's regime.



The cheerful-seeming slogans are deeply at odds with the violent, horrifying reality that many Chinese people, including Swirl and Wen, are experiencing.



Thien mentions that the Party officials have an electric fan, which subtly implies their class privilege—it is unlikely that most people in Bingpai, who readers already know are poor and rural, have access to such luxuries. The "large piece of cake" also conveys the same message and implicate Ba Lute in perpetuating this social inequality.



*In this moment, readers learn that Swirl and Wen have been sent to re-education camps because they had art and literature on their property. It is particularly unsettling that having a *Book of History* would be incriminating—this suggests that the Communist Party isn't just invested in controlling artistic expression, but also the narratives of history that people have access to. Through moments like this, Thien frames Mao's persecution as an attack on the arts, literature, and access to knowledge.*



Ba Lute suddenly recognizes the village official: the two played in the Shanghai Conservatory together. At the time, the village official was an oboist. Ba Lute asks him if he still has his instrument, and the official responds that he does. “Tell me your requirements,” Ba Lute says, changing the conversation back to the topic of Swirl and Wen the Dreamer. But the village official insists that Ba Lute misunderstands: Swirl and Wen cannot be brought back from the camps, nor can Ba Lute receive permission to visit them. “You must know how things are,” the official tells Ba Lute, “you are justly celebrated! [...] Heroes like you built the road. I’m only following the path,” he adds. As Ba Lute leaves, the official says, “One should be careful of the sun [...] One should learn to practice in the shade.”

Meanwhile, at the re-education camp, Swirl is freezing. Even when she submerges her hands in water at the tap, she “fail[s] to register any sensation. [It’s] as if the hands belong[] to someone else.” At the camp, she shares one bed with seven other people who spend their free time speculating about when they will be released. Swirl has received news that Zhuli is now registered to live in Shanghai, which makes Swirl so relieved that she weeps, even though she is known for never crying. The only thing Swirl knows about Wen the Dreamer, though, is that he has been placed at the men’s re-education camp nearby—where it is rumored that no one survives.

Each night, the women with whom Swirl shares a bed share stories. Soon enough, they all know everything about one another. Swirl reflects that she was about to cross over into Hong Kong when she started receiving copies of **The Book of Records** and she fell in love with Wen the Dreamer. If it hadn’t been for that turn of events, she might not have ended up here. She recalls how, when she was sentenced, the head of the Bingpai revolutionary committee accused her, saying, “Deep in your heart you oppose the Communist Party.” Although it wasn’t true at the time, Swirl admits to herself that now, at the re-education camp, it certainly is true.

Swirl’s closest friend at the re-education camp is a translator known as Lady Dostoevsky. Well-known for her translations, Lady Dostoevsky wryly comments one night that she wonders “how [she] could have studied Dostoevsky so keenly and not realized [she] was digging [her] own grave?”

In this passage, Ba Lute tries to bribe the village official, sensing an opportunity since the two know each other. This undermines his moral authority, and suggests that the Communist Party participates in corrupt practices such as bribery. In this passage, playing music seems to be a stand-in for appreciating art, owning books, or engaging in any other type of artistic expression that might get one in trouble with the Communist government. The official seems to imply that what’s important isn’t that people not do these things—now labelled counter-revolutionary crimes—but that they hide them. This contributes to a climate of deceit and lack of trust in other people, which further causes separation among communities.



In this moment, Thien’s choice to describe Swirl’s lack of sensation as feeling like her hands “belong to someone else” suggests that her experience of brutality in the re-education camps is causing her to lose her sense of self. In a way, this is the objective of the camps: to destroy people’s individual identities and replace it with identification with the Communist Party and its values.



Swirl’s experience in the re-education camp furthers Thien’s characterization of the Chinese government as vengeful and punitive of those it considers to be its enemies. This seems to be one of the camp’s core aims, rather than “re-educating” those who participate in it. Indeed, Swirl seems not to have been re-educated at all. Instead, her experience of poor living conditions solidified in her a loathing for the Party.



Thien’s choice to include Lady Dostoevsky’s character further emphasizes her point that the government persecutes artists, writers, and other people dedicated to creative expression and storytelling. Lady Dostoevsky’s comment here is ironic: reading a celebrated Russian author seems far too innocent an act to lead her to be “digging her own grave.”



One year, there is famine in the re-education camps. Swirl almost dies of hunger, only managing to stay alive thanks to Lady Dostoevsky stealing rations from the camp director. Only three of the seven people who originally shared Swirl's bed survive the famine. Shortly after, Swirl and Lady Dostoevsky are transferred to another camp where they can receive mail and they are allowed visitors. It isn't long before Swirl gets packages of letters from Big Mother Knife and Zhuli. What's more, Sparrow comes to visit her, travelling five full days from Shanghai to bring biscuits, rice, cigarettes, vegetable preserves, and candies to the camp. He has also brought a picture of Zhuli, and upon seeing it, Swirl's eyes fill with tears: she hasn't seen her daughter's face in four years.

Sparrow tells Swirl that Ba Lute thinks she should live with Big Mother Knife in Shanghai rather than returning to Bingpai. Although Big Mother Knife has been trying for years, she has been unable to locate Wen the Dreamer. As she watches Sparrow leave that day, Swirl wonders what it will be like to move back to the city and she finds herself unable to imagine anything beyond the empty desert landscape that she has grown used to. Eventually, Swirl leaves the camp, her conviction overturned "without warning." Indeed, "like thousands of other surviving counter-revolutionaries, she would be informed, after years of prison labor, that she had never been a criminal."

CHAPTER 5

In Canada, Li-ling waits for her mother to come back from dropping Ai-ming off at the U.S. border. Her mother arrives around seven in the evening, and as the two eat the dinner Li-ling has prepared, Li-ling's mother shares how the day unfolded: before arriving at the border, Ai-ming stopped so she could buy Li-ling her favorite sponge cake. Li-ling's mother waited until Ai-ming boarded the Greyhound and then she watched the bus pull away into the distance.

That night in bed, Li-ling lies awake, missing Ai-ming, who has left her a letter: "We told each other secretly in the quiet midnight world / That we wished to fly to heaven, two birds joined wingtip to wingtip / And to grow together on the earth, two branches of one tree. / Earth endures, heaven endures, even though they both shall end." Reading the poem, Li-ling thinks to herself that Ai-ming was the link holding together their entire family: she unites Li-ling with her father and her mother.

During the famine, Lady Dostoevsky acts as a stand-in family member. In this way, although the re-education camp has successfully punished Swirl by isolating her from her family, it hasn't destroyed her ability to form meaningful bonds with people and create a sense of community. What's more, the fact that Sparrow went to the trouble of traveling five full days just to see her demonstrates her family's dedication to each other, and that hardship and separation will not likely destroy their bonds.



Here, Thien highlights the Communist Party's inconsistent policies, and the way that this inconsistency creates great harm. Swirl endured tremendous trauma believing that she had committed a crime against her government only to discover that the government had, seemingly on a whim, changed its mind and decided otherwise. This inconsistency undermines the authority of the government and suggests that the force with which they impose their moral values isn't upheld by a clear understanding of what those morals are.



Ai-ming demonstrates her affection for Li-ling in buying her favorite sponge cake for her. This gesture suggests that their close bond will remain strong even through the separation that their political circumstances have forced upon them.



In this moment, the poem Li-ling reads speaks to the enduring quality of close emotional relationships. The poem suggests that loving relationships endure for as long as time does. Li-ling rightly observes that Ai-ming has helped to connect her to her father—through Ai-ming, she has been able to access archives of family stories that help her understand who her father was.



In 1965 Shanghai, Swirl has just been released from the re-education camp and he has gone to live with Big Mother Knife. Late one night, everyone but Sparrow—who is up late transcribing **music**—is fast asleep when a young man comes to the door. The thin stranger asks after Sparrow himself and he delivers a crumpled envelope with the same handwriting used in **The Book of Records**. The stranger says that he has news. Sparrow invites him in, but the stranger refuses, so Sparrow resolves to give him money instead. When the mysterious young man leaves, Sparrow returns to his room and he stays up all night reading the letter.

The letter, from Wen the Dreamer, lets Sparrow know that Wen has escaped from the re-education camp, where Wen says the conditions were indescribable. Wen reveals that he has been in Shanghai and he has seen his family—although his family wasn't able to see him. It isn't safe for Wen to stay in the area, so he's on the run again. But he has attached another chapter of **The Book of Records**.

It isn't long before authorities arrive at the door in search of Wen the Dreamer, accusing Ba Lute “of harboring an enemy of the state.” At first, Ba Lute is calm in the face of their allegations, but when the officers demand that Swirl and Zhuli come in for question, Ba Lute flies into a rage. He “beg[ins] rampaging through the rooms” and shouts “I've had enough! [...] You've wronging imprisoned [Wen's] wife! [...] You little shits have stained our Revolution and one day I'm going to haul you before Chen Yi himself and have him whip your balls. Donkeys! Do you have a clue who I am?” After the officers leave, Sparrow goes to look for Wen's letter, which he hid in a can on the balcony, but it has disappeared without a trace.

At the Shanghai Conservatory, where Sparrow teaches and Zhuli studies, the two cousins dedicate their mornings to their **musical** practice. On Sparrow's way to his practice room, he passes the office of He Luting, the Shanghai Conservatory's director. He seems to be having an argument with a visitor—“exactly what constitutes a crime these days?” he asks the other person, whose face Sparrow cannot see. Sparrow recalls the stories he knows about He Luting. For instance, He Luting's brother had a French music text when they were growing up. Even as a child, He Luting adored the text so much that he would stay up late at night to sneak downstairs and copy it.

The fact that a mysterious stranger has showed up at Sparrow's doorstep to deliver a message suggests that the letter he has for the family needs to be hidden from the government. If it were a normal letter, it could be sent through the post, but the implication in this passage is that the level of censorship and government involvement that would occur in the regular mail would jeopardize the sender of this letter. This speaks to the government's censorship of free speech.



By escaping from the re-education camp, Wen permanently ends any possibility of re-integrating into Chinese society—he has established himself as someone who resists the government. In this moment, The Book of Records becomes an important tool for Wen to communicate with his family even as he is in isolation, living as though in exile even though he is in his own country.



In this moment, it becomes clear that any association with Wen the Dreamer will put the entire family in danger. What's more, it's obvious that the government has eyes everywhere: if they have been able to trace an anonymous stranger showing up at the door to Wen, Shanghai must really be full of spies—a trademark of extraordinarily repressive regimes. Ba Lute flying into a rage suggests that the Communist Party has changed greatly since he was a more powerful and involved member of it—it seems that the movement has become something other than what he, and likely his comrades, intended.



This moment offers further evidence that the way the Communist Party operates is changing. He Luting's exclamation lets readers know that the law is changing faster than Chinese citizens can keep track of, and that what once may have been seen as normal activities are now crimes. He Luting's love for French music puts him in the category of people who value creative expression over the government's insistence on all art being a form of propaganda.



After spending the morning practicing, Zhuli goes to Sparrow's practice room to invite him for lunch. Sparrow isn't ready to take a break—he's working on writing his own **musical** composition and he is so enthralled with the task that he often composes for 18 hours a day. As Zhuli is cajoling her cousin, insisting that he needs a break, Jiang Kai, one of the Conservatory's best pianists, comes into the room. With Jiang Kai's help, Zhuli manages to convince her cousin to take a break to eat something and go on a walk. As the three walk through the park, Kai and Sparrow pull ahead. Observing them, Zhuli thinks to herself that Kai "[wears] his rural background well, like a penny novel wrapped inside an elegant cover. When not smiling, though, he [has] a face that [can] only be described as vigilant."

Zhuli decides that she is done practicing for the day and she goes home. There, she sees Swirl in the kitchen stealing beans—ever since returning from the re-education camp, Swirl has a habit of trying to pilfer food. This habit frustrates Zhuli, but soon she is distracted by something else: there are papers on the table, and she sees that Swirl has been copying **The Book of Records**. Swirl puts her finger on a map and she draws a long, winding trajectory, muttering to herself about where Wen the Dreamer is. Zhuli realizes that her mother is serious about trying to find him and she asks what Swirl will do when the public finds out she is "siding with a convicted rightist."

Swirl tells Zhuli her detailed plan: just as the original author of **The Book of Records** used variations in the protagonists' names—Da-wei and May Fourth—to hint at locations, Swirl plans to do the same in her transcription of the text. She will leave clues meant only for Wen the Dreamer so that he can find her in a safe location—a plant and flower clinic belonging to Lady Dostoevsky, who, after being released from the re-education camp, has been living in Gansu Province. The clinic, in Swirl's opinion, has a wonderful name: Notes from the Underground.

Swirl tells Zhuli that she will leave the next morning. Zhuli, still afraid, embraces her mother. Swirl's plan, and all the literature it involves, reminds Zhuli of her home in Bingpai, of all of the books and instruments they had hidden underground. For Zhuli, that place was a "magical kingdom." She wonders if such caverns still exist and if she will ever be able to enter one again. Swirl warns Zhuli be careful about what she says and whom she trusts. "No one is immune," Swirl tells her daughter, "Everyone thinks that with one betrayal they can save themselves and everyone they love." She tells Zhuli not to take any risks, and rather, that she should concentrate only on her **music**.

In this moment, Thien describes yet another aspect of the new government's understanding of class. Kai, who comes from a "rural, revolutionary" background, now has class privilege. The social status he has acquired precisely because he came from a family with no social status puts him high up on the social hierarchy. Zhuli notes his vigilance, which suggests that even though he seems privileged to her, he does not fully feel safe in society—likely, he is aware that there are spies and informers all around, and seeks not to be persecuted in the threatening political climate.



Here, Swirl's habit of stealing food is a remnant of the trauma she experienced in the re-education camps. Having experienced starvation, she fearfully hides stashes of food to prevent herself from having to go through the same thing again. In this moment, readers also realize that the chapter of The Book of Records Wen sent to the family is, in fact, a code. In this way, it again serves as a tool to unite Swirl and Wen. Zhuli's concern about how being associated with Wen will affect her mother's safety highlights the vigilance necessary to navigate the political climate.



Thien further develops the idea that stories serve as ways to connect families to one another. Swirl and Wen write their messages in secret code through The Book of Records, which protects them from the possibility of censorship. In this way, storytelling serves as a way that the characters are able to resist their oppressive government and remain connected to one another even though the Party seeks to punish them by keeping them apart.



In this moment, Swirl's warning speaks to the way that the government has been able to pit community members against one another. By turning in someone they know who may not even have committed a serious crime, or who may have done something minor to imply resistance to the government, many people think that they protect themselves and their loved ones. Ironically, this has the opposite effect to what communist values might imply; rather than forming a strong collective, this impulse creates communities in which people are even more distrusting of each other.



Zhuli heads back to the Conservatory, where she meets Sparrow. The two talk about the piece Zhuli is practicing—the Ravel by Tchaikovsky, which her teacher hopes will earn her a place in the next Tchaikovsky Competition. Zhuli, though, is doubtful that she'll be able to enter: "I'm the daughter of a convicted rightist," she tells him. "I won't be allowed to compete abroad."

In fact, it's possible that no one will be allowed to compete abroad. A couple of days before, Zhuli was speaking with Kai about the Ravel when he told her that most opportunities to win scholarships or participate in competitions would be withdrawn. The Conservatory was quiet that night, and Kai told her he suspected that one day it would close for good. Zhuli reminded Kai that his father is a Party member, to which Kai responded that he was a "pure seed of the earth. A peasant who joined the Revolution so early, even [Chairman Mao] didn't know there was one." Zhuli responded that she never believed anything Kai says. "I'm glad, Zhuli," he replies. "Never trust me." And, abruptly, Kai kissed her.

After kissing Kai, Zhuli goes to her political studies class, where, although she is an hour early, she is the last to arrive. A girl wearing a red armband "[makes] a show of taking down her name." That particular classmate was one of the few Conservatory students selected to take a trip out to the countryside last summer. (Since He Luting refused to stop classes, only "the children of cadres had been permitted to go." All of those who returned from the field trip to the rural areas returned determined to "show[] their newfound knowledge by continuously questioning their teachers, their parents and **music** itself." The students have written posters, for instance, interrogating the political utility of music. They have barred teachers from their classrooms and they have claimed that it doesn't matter if they're talented—in a Revolution, one must choose ugliness over beauty.

At the political studies meeting that day, Zhuli and her classmates begin by writing criticism of themselves and others for their bourgeois sentiments or lack of whole-hearted participation in the revolution. The girl sitting next to Zhuli mocks her for "favoring **music** in the 'negative' and 'pessimistic' key of E-flat minor, and continuing to play sonatas by revisionist Soviet composers," for instance. To redeem herself, Zhuli "vow[s] to embrace the optimism of the C and G major keys" and makes sure to end her self-criticism by reciting various revolutionary slogans.

Again, Thien addresses the unequal class structure that has been created under communism: Zhuli's parents' actions have an effect on the social and economic opportunities available to her, which seems to run counter to the values of communism, in which everyone is supposed to have equal opportunities.



Here, readers learn that Kai seems to be involved with the new political movements that are occurring. He is aware of changes that are already occurring and seems able to predict future ones, too. The fact that the Conservatory will likely close suggests that the government is planning to further restrict freedom of creative expression. Indeed, his background as a peasant whose father joined the Revolution before Mao "knew there was one" likely grants Kai an opportunity to participate more extensively in politics than someone like Zhuli, the daughter of a "convicted rightist" would have.



In this moment, Thien highlights how revolutionary culture affects youth. The girl likely takes Zhuli's name down because being late to class might suggest that communist politics aren't important to Zhuli. Similarly, the students seem to engage competitively with communist ideology—Thien's language around the way they engage in political studies class suggests that there is a performativity to their political engagement. Indeed, the students seem to be more preoccupied with proving their revolutionary qualities to their peers than they are with genuinely embodying revolutionary politics.



The characterization of the students as superficial and performative further develops here. Saying that the key of a musical piece can determine whether it is revolutionary or not is absolutely ridiculous, and it implies that music has a power of direct communication that it generally does not. The girl's criticism of Zhuli is rooted in the government's idea that everything, including creative free expression, can and should be infused with propagandistic messages.



After the political studies class, Zhuli meets up with Sparrow and Kai again. She thinks to herself that although she and Kai are both talented, Sparrow is really the most gifted musician at the Conservatory. Sparrow's **music** makes her remember that the present is all there is, "yet is the one thing we will never learn to hold in our hands." What's more, Sparrow names his compositions with numbers, while other students at the Conservatory give their work revolutionary, poetic names like "Young Soldier's Joy."

Zhuli wonders if Sparrow has somehow encoded his **music** with secret messages, just as Wen the Dreamer has encoded his copy of **The Book of Records** with secret messages for Swirl. Thinking of her father, Zhuli recalls a conversation between her mother and Big Mother Knife, who had warned Swirl to be careful—"even ghosts" are illegal in this political climate. Big Mother Knife warned that another "purge" was on its way, that many more people would be sent to the camps. Still, Zhuli stays up with Kai and Sparrow almost all night, talking and playing music.

Sparrow's music contrasts with the type of "revolutionary" music that Zhuli has just vowed to play in her political studies class. While others aim to make their classical music tools for the government's propaganda, Sparrow seems to appreciate music for the value of its own pure expression. While others are attached to the idea of building a revolutionary future, Sparrow enjoys writing music that acknowledges the reality and beauty of the present.



Here, Zhuli demonstrates that she has a different, more nuanced understanding of the role of storytelling than her peers. She thinks that art and music can seek to convey personal messages rather than political messages, thereby connecting families to one another. This thought starkly contrasts with Big Mother Knife's warning of a "purge," which likely will be another government initiative that divides families and communities.



CHAPTER 6

After Ai-ming leaves for the United States, Li-ling and her mother don't hear from her for years. But one day close to Li-ling's birthday, Ai-ming calls from New York, where she'd been working odd jobs for the past couple of years. On the phone, Ai-ming sounds sadder and more distracted than Li-ling remembers. Li-ling promises to visit her soon in New York. Just before they hang up, Ai-ming recites a couple of lines from a poem: "I am lovesick for some lost paradise / I would rise free and journey far away," she tells Li-ling, who worries that Ai-ming has fallen into hopelessness and despair.

In this passage, Thien highlights both Li-ling's and Ai-ming's loneliness. Ai-ming, in particular, through reciting those words, comes across as lost and desperate—indeed, as a political refugee, she is disconnected from her family and homeland. That she and Li-ling often communicate with one another through poems further establishes storytelling and literature as means by which families stay connected to one another.



A couple of months later, Li-ling and her mother get a letter from Ai-ming in which she tells them that her own mother's health has deteriorated, and that she is going back home to China. Worried, Li-ling and her mother go to New York to Ai-ming's last known address to see if they can get more details as to how and when she went to China. But no one seems to have any details, so the two just wander through Chinatown carrying a picture of Ai-ming. As they walk, Li-ling recalls a poem from **The Book of Records**: "Family members wander, scattered on the road, attached to shadows / Longing for home, five landscapes merge into a single city."

*In this passage, Ai-ming officially becomes lost to Li-ling and her mother, solidifying her isolation from them. Through experiencing the sorrow and sense of loss that many characters in *The Book of Records* feel, Li-ling is able to directly link her own experience with that of the book, which establishes *The Book of Records* as part of her own family story. The quotation from the book suggests that although families may be separated physically, they are united in their collective experience of yearning for one another.*



In 1998, Li-ling's mother is diagnosed with cancer. Distraught, Li-ling buries herself in numbers and facts, trying to discover for herself the statistical probability of her mother's survival. Her mother approaches the illness with more practicality, altering her diet and dealing with sick leave, health and life insurance, and other unpleasant aspects of bureaucracy. When she writes her will, she leaves some money for Ai-ming, who will never claim it. In 1999, Li-ling's mother begs Li-ling to go find Ai-ming. She feels guilty that she promised Ai-ming's mother she'd look after Ai-ming and that she's now lost contact with her. Certain that Ai-ming has gone to Shanghai or Beijing, Li-ling's mother tells Li-ling to try those cities first.

It was 15 years ago that Li-ling's mother died and left her with the responsibility of finding Ai-ming. Li-ling still hasn't succeeded, but she has dedicated much of her time to reconstructing the story of her own family and Ai-ming's, and the ways in which the two families have interwoven histories. Every now and then, she sends letters to Ai-ming's last known address. She longs to tell Ai-ming what she remembers of **The Book of Records**.

In 1965 Shanghai, Sparrow has just recited the lost letter from Wen the Dreamer to Big Mother Knife and Swirl. Both are delighted, and Swirl instructs Sparrow that if he's ever able to contact Wen, he should tell Wen to meet her at Notes from the Underground, Lady Dostoevsky's plant and flower clinic in Lanzhou City. Swirl and Big Mother Knife are about to leave on their mission to find Wen and they make Sparrow promise to look after Zhuli.

Meanwhile, Sparrow is off on an adventure of his own: the Conservatory has commissioned him to go collect folk songs from a rural province. Kai will accompany him, serving as a research assistant. The next morning, Sparrow meets Kai at the bus station and the two board an over-crowded bus. During the ride, Sparrow falls asleep and he wakes up to find Kai's arm wrapped protectively around him. On the next leg of the journey, there is no room inside the bus, and so Sparrow and Kai must ride on the roof—which is almost equally crowded. Kai, "bewitching" as always, "[takes] center stage"—he can "speak with both the quickstep of the city and the balladry of the countryside." Soon enough, Kai hands the spotlight over to Sparrow, asking him to play a song. Sparrow obliges and he gets the students singing along, to the chagrin of the passengers below.

Here, again, Thien draws readers' attention to importance of family connections. On her deathbed, the most important thing to Li-ling's mother is that her daughter re-establish contact with a loved one who has fallen out of their lives. Li-ling again demonstrates her resistance to recognizing family connection as essential: rather than allowing herself to feel grief at her mother's illness, she tries to ignore her own emotional experience by burying herself in numbers—a similar avoidance strategy to the one she employed after her father died.



It seems that Li-ling, in the present moment, has finally been able to recognize how important it is in her lifetime to stay connected to family. It's interesting that what she most wants to talk to Ai-ming about is The Book of Records, as though talking about their shared family history might take precedence over Li-ling sharing the details about her own life. This again highlights the value of family connection.



In this part of the story, Wen the Dreamer continues to successfully communicate with his family in spite of the government's attempts to capture him and isolate him from them. Although Swirl is also on a mission to reunite with family, she is, at the same time, abandoning her daughter. The situation's complexity highlights how difficult it is for the characters to maintain healthy family connection under Mao's regime.



Thien's description of Kai's behavior in this passage casts him as manipulative and opportunistic. The fact that he is "bewitching" and is able to code switch between both rural and urban dialects suggests that he is a compulsive people-pleaser. Within his political climate, it is likely that he developed the ability to code switch in order to prevent himself from experiencing political persecution. By characterizing Kai as someone who is safe from political persecution—Thien earlier describes Kai as having a revolutionary class background—the book further demonstrates how dishonesty and performance are what really protect people under Mao's regime.



The first two days of the trip, Kai and Sparrow stay in villages outside of Wuhan City. Before Sparrow left, Ba Lute told him before he left to look for a man named Comrade Glass Eye—Ba Lute believes this man may be able to help the family locate Wen the Dreamer. On the second day, a friendly villager invites Sparrow and Kai to eat at his home after seeing them perform in the village. It turns out that the man knows Comrade Glass Eye and he promises to take Sparrow and Kai to see him the next day. That night, Sparrow and Kai sleep in the same bed, and, in the middle of the night, Kai turns and rests his hand on Sparrow's collarbone. Sparrow feels aroused, and ashamed of being aroused, but he doesn't move Kai's hand. Kai, in turn, doesn't move away.

The next day, Sparrow and Kai go with their host to meet Comrade Glass Eye. Ba Lute had sent gifts for his old friend with Sparrow—cigarettes and candies. The old man is grateful and he invites them in. He begins to share stories about his past. Labelled a rightist and sent to re-education camps, Comrade Glass Eye used to work in experiments with electricity. When he was in the camps, though, the villagers raided his workroom—the government mandated that people “struggle to produce 10.7 million tons of steel,” so the people took all of Comrade Glass Eye's tools and they gave them over to the steel collection effort. Unfortunately, according to Comrade Glass Eye, the metal from those tools and machines couldn't be repurposed, and so it went completely to waste.

Sparrow mentions Wen the Dreamer to Comrade Glass Eye, and at first, the older man doesn't show signs of recognizing the name of Sparrow's uncle. Later during their visit, however, Comrade Glass Eye takes Sparrow aside and he tells him that according to rumor, Wen the Dreamer has escaped the re-education camp. In fact, Comrade Glass Eye was at the same camp as Wen the Dreamer. He tells Sparrow that at the camp, during the cold, bitter winter, the men slept in caves. Many of them starved to death. Comrade Glass Eye is aware there are spies everywhere and he worries that Sparrow may be one himself. But, Comrade Glass Eye says, since he is very old, he has little to lose—and he can't betray Wen the Dreamer since he doesn't know where Wen has gone.

Ba Lute again tries to leverage his social status privilege in order to protect his family. Because he fought in the Communist Revolution, he has access to people all around the country who may know about Wen's whereabouts and be able to intervene in his case. It is clear that Ba Lute chose to send Sparrow to speak with Comrade Glass Eye in person, rather than sending a letter, because it would be impossible to communicate about such a sensitive topic by way of the post, which likely is censored. The covert, laborious nature in which the family goes about trying to locate Wen demonstrates their commitment to one another.



Here, again, Thien highlights the incompetence of the Communist Party. It seems that ill-informed policies have led to senseless violence and destruction, What's more, Comrade Glass Eye's tools actually seem to have been useful and could have led to developing China into the modern country that the Communist Party may have hoped to create by producing so much steel. The juxtaposition between his scientific experiments and the Communist Party's poor policies highlights the latter's incompetence.



Comrade Glass Eye's concern that Sparrow may be a spy again speaks to the hypervigilance with which Chinese citizens must navigate their relationships in such a tense political environment, under a government that encourages people to betray one another. His description of the inhumane conditions of the re-education camps again draw attention to the Party's senseless and unnecessary uses of violence, which seems to be aimed at punishing its enemies rather than constructively rehabilitating its constituents.



Comrade Glass Eye resents the time he spent at the re-education camp, saying, “Men whose only crime was honest criticism were digging ditches and wasting away. Meanwhile, back at home, their families lived in ignominy, their kids were hounded in school or kicked out altogether...” And, at the camp, he and Wen the Dreamer were starving—by 1959, according to Comrade Glass Eye, they were burying the men “by the truckloads.” But the intrepid Wen was able to survive by pilfering food from the camp directors. He helped Comrade Glass Eye get food, as well. Luckily, Comrade Glass Eye’s mother had a childhood friend who “worked discreetly to get [him] freed,” which meant he had to abandon Wen. When Wen told Comrade Glass Eye that he had a plan to escape the camp, Comrade Glass Eye thought he had gone mad.

Before Comrade Glass Eye left the camp, Wen the Dreamer made sure to show him the lining of his suitcase. There, Wen had written all of the names of the men who starved to death at the re-education camp. Comrade Glass Eye thinks that this is “the only accurate record that exists” of these men. Wen the Dreamer told his friend that he planned to hide all of the names in **The Book of Records**, that he planned to “populate this fictional world with true names and true deeds. [The men] would live on, as dangerous as revolutionaries but as intangible as ghosts.” Wen the Dreamer believed that his fate was to continue distributing copies of the story wherever he went, to spread the knowledge to the world of the suffering that was hidden in plain sight.

Meanwhile, back in Shanghai, Zhuli practices at the conservatory and thinks of Big Mother Knife and Swirl. She wonders if they’ve reached their destination safely and she gets lost in the memory of the crime she committed that made her parents disappear for the first time, that landed her mother in the re-education camp. At only six years old, Zhuli is kicked out of the village school for being the “child of a disgraced landlord.” The peasants’ association decides that it would be better for Zhuli to study to become a farmer, so she tries to join her parents in the field—but, being so young, Zhuli isn’t much use and she just gets in the way. Her mother tells her to go home, and Zhuli does, but she is unbearably lonely by herself in the hut.

One day, Zhuli decides to explore. She ends up back on the property that used to belong to Wen’s family and she finds a trapdoor underneath a tree. Small enough to fit through the narrow space, Zhuli clammers down and she finds herself in a spacious library full of books and **musical** instruments. From that day on, she goes down into the special place every day, learning to play some of the classical musical instruments, to which she becomes particularly attached.

Again, Thien details the ways in which a hierarchical class structure remains intact even under communism. The fact that the children of people sent to re-education camps would be punished by being kicked out of school indicates that the government was invested in creating lasting class inequality, in which the children of rightists would not have access to the same rights as other children. This system creates no opportunity for upward mobility, or for a person to differentiate herself from her family. What’s more, the fact that Comrade Glass Eye was freed through a family connection speaks to corruption within the Party.



In this moment, readers realize that for Wen, The Book of Records isn’t just a place where he can record his own family history, but also the stories of others who have been brutalized under the cruel Communist regime. Wen clearly believes that in telling the stories of those who suffered under the government, he threatens the power of said government—this is why he believes the dead men could be simultaneously dangerous and invisible, as they are disguised in fiction. Wen aims to spread awareness about the government’s cruelties by telling the hidden stories of those who it oppresses.



Zhuli’s experience directly parallels the experiences of other children of convicted rightists. She, like them, was denied the opportunity to study in school due to her parents’ actions. What’s more, the villagers seem to have decided that Zhuli ought to study to become a farmer as a form of punishment. This seems to be a hypocritical use of communist ideology; if all classes are equal, why would becoming a farmer be a punishment? In this passage, Thien draws attention to the hypocrisy that underlies many Communist Party policies.



Here, by describing Zhuli’s sense of wonder at discovering the books and instruments, Thien subtly highlights the innocence of creative expression. Zhuli is just a child learning to about different forms of artistic expression; it is clear from this passage that her actions, and, indeed, the existence of the library, harm no one.



Because the harvest is late that year, the farmers and their children are all watching the ground closely. One day, a neighborhood boy sees Zhuli emerge from the ground, and that same day, the villagers come to dig up the secret hiding space and confiscate everything that it contains. To the village, this is “proof that [Wen the Dreamer’s family] were biding their time and continued to conceal their wealth.” Zhuli is shunned by all the neighbors, even those who had previously been kind to her. That same night, members of the village come to her hut and take Swirl and Wen the Dreamer away.

Zhuli is left for three days in the old hut without her parents. She has nothing to eat or drink until the third day, when the wife of the village head comes to fetch her. Muttering that her parents “were lucky not to have their heads chopped off,” the woman carts Zhuli off to the bus station, where they soon embark for Shanghai.

Now, in Shanghai, Zhuli remembers how she’d wanted to apologize to Swirl when her mother came back from the re-education camps. Zhuli imagines what would have happened if she had never discovered the trapdoor, if her parents had never been sent to the camps. “And yet,” Zhuli thinks, “we are alive now. I am alive. My mother is alive. It is a new age, a new beginning, and we are here.”

The difference between the narrative the villagers invent about Zhuli’s family—that they are conspiring to hide their wealth—is vastly different from the reality, which is that Zhuli is a bored six-year-old who has nothing to do but explore because those same villagers banned her from school. The lack of compassion with which the villagers treat Zhuli and her family demonstrates the violent and punishing attitudes that undermine many of the Party’s policies.



Although the woman is generous in taking Zhuli to Shanghai, her perspective towards Zhuli’s parents is incredibly ungenerous. She clearly believes in violence and oppression rather than rehabilitation and reintegration into the community.



Zhuli has to bear an unsung consequence for her parents being sent to the camps: a sense of guilt that she, although young, has caused them so much suffering. This is a difficult burden for a child to bear, and demonstrates a subtler way in which the government’s oppression affects its people.



CHAPTER 7

In the spring of 2000, Li-ling fully dedicates herself to her studies after her mother dies. She finishes her PhD in mathematics, and she begins teaching at a university in Vancouver. A couple of years later, Li-ling goes to Hong Kong. Her life as a professor is isolating, but in Hong Kong she lets loose a little bit, staying out late every night. On her last day in the city, she visits the apartment where her father, Kai, lived before he took his life. When Li-ling goes into the apartment building from which Kai jumped to kill himself, she can’t bring herself to knock on the door of the apartment, afraid that Kai will open the door and that she’ll have to see “the window that he climbed through.” After leaving the building, she fills out paperwork requesting a copy of the file that the police made after Kai died.

In her description of Li-ling’s life, Thien demonstrates how a connection to family is inevitable, even though Li-ling seeks to avoid it. Mathematics is possibly the least emotionally involved profession that Li-ling could choose, suggesting that she uses her work life as a strategy to escape her grief and pain surrounding family. However, when she goes back to Hong Kong, a place that is significant for her family, she seems to come alive, expressing a social side of herself that she has lost touch with. In this way, Thien frames family connection and understanding as key for Li-ling’s individual development.



A month later, the files arrive at Li-ling's apartment in Vancouver. Along with her father's clothes and the autopsy reports, the police have enclosed letters that Li-ling has never seen before, including *The Sun Shines on the People's Square*, a 31-page composition that Sparrow wrote and dedicated to Kai. After rereading the documents several times and looking closely at the photographs of her father's body—which stir up unbearable emotions—Li-ling places the documents back in the box and she puts the box under her desk, resolving to move on with her life and bury herself in the world of numbers.

Years go by, and Li-ling remains vulnerable and emotionally fragile in spite of her efforts to think only of mathematics. In 2010, she decides to travel to Mainland China, where she continues searching for Ai-ming. She tries searching for Ai-ming on Chinese social media sites, but to no avail—"The Great Firewall," after all, deletes a significant percentage of online chats in China. Li-ling adjusts her strategy by posting messages encoded in passages from **The Book of Records** or jokes that she thinks Ai-ming would enjoy. Still, she finds nothing.

In Shanghai, decades prior, Zhuli practices violin at the Conservatory when Kai—who just got back from his trip to the countryside with Sparrow—interrupts her. Irritated, Zhuli asks him what he wants, and Kai insists that she come upstairs with him. "Something has happened," he says. On the floors above them, Zhuli hears commotion; students are running around chaotically. They see the walls covered with posters denouncing someone or something that has to do with the Conservatory. The language used in the posters seems to be the same as the newspaper editorials in which Party cadres endlessly denounce "counter-revolutionaries." One poster reads, "WE MUST SWEEP AWAY THE HORDE OF DEMONS / WHO HAVE ENTRENCHED THEMSELVES / IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS." Another reads, "BREAK THE BOURGEOIS 'SPECIALISTS,' 'SCHOLARS,' / 'AUTHORITIES' AND 'VENERABLE MASTERS' / AND TRAMPLE EVERY BIT OF THEIR PRESTIGE / INTO THE DUST."

Zhuli and Kai have reached He Luting's office. From inside, Zhuli thinks she hears **music**—specifically, she hears *Petite Suite* by Debussy, which surprises her so much that she almost laughs. Debussy has been "labelled decadent" by the Beijing papers—so decadent that his music is "an insult to the hardships of the poor." Near He Luting's office, Zhuli sees a long poster on which the names of so-called "scholars" and "specialists" are written: included among these are Sparrow and Ba Lute. Seeing a crowd of her chanting classmates pass her, Zhuli says that Ba Lute performed for Chairman Mao and that he was a revolutionary hero. But no one responds to her, and Kai takes her by the hand and pulls her away.

Li-ling's choice not to go into the apartment from which her father jumped suggests that she may have still been avoiding processing certain emotions. Still, her choice to ask for the police record and her courage in looking at the photo of her father's body speaks to her willingness to engage with her family's past. She begins to demonstrate the bravery she needs to engage in such emotionally trying work.



Thien's mention that the government continues to censor its citizens speech—even in private messaging—shows readers that the country still separates people from one another in order to maintain power. In using The Book of Records to try to contact Ai-ming, Li-ling participates in a longstanding family tradition, solidifying the importance of The Book of Records as a symbol for family connection and storytelling.



In this moment, Kai alerts Zhuli and Sparrow to the official start of the Cultural Revolution, a period of time in which Mao's government directly targeted cultural institutions as being home to hordes of rightists and counterrevolutionaries. The violent and extreme language used on the posters—referring to musicians as a "horde of demons"—hints at the violence with which the Cultural Revolution will be enacted in the future. The fact that "specialists" and "scholars" have somehow become class enemies speaks to the anti-intellectual, anti-artistic sentiment that pervades the Communist Party's thinking at the time. This furthers the government's attack on freedom of expression and thought.



Here, by playing the music of a "decadent" composer even in the midst of such a politically fragile moment, He Luting demonstrates his courage and willingness to resist the government's new attack on freedom of creative expression. The fact that Ba Lute's and Sparrow's names are on the list of those labelled "scholars" and "specialists" speaks to the Communist Party's lack of consistency, since Ba Lute formerly was labelled a revolutionary hero. This suggests more broadly that policies and values under Mao's government are inconsistent and possibly hypocritical.



Leaving the Conservatory, Zhuli thinks to herself that Big Mother Knife was right—another campaign is underway. As they walk, Kai tells her that this is not just happening at the Conservatory, but at universities around the country, even in Beijing. Zhuli tells him that she wants to go back and pick up the scores she left in the practice room at the Conservatory, but Kai discourages her from going. “This is the start of a new campaign,” he tells her, “Don’t you understand? [...] The Red Guards can turn your life to ashes.” Instead of letting her go back to get the scores she was originally working on, Kai hands her some pieces by Xian Xinghai, a revolutionary hero. Bitterly, Zhuli tells Kai that she’ll “forget Prokofiev” and “play the ‘March of the Volunteers’ and ‘The Internationale’ for all eternity.” She says that should please everyone—most of all, him.

As Kai packs his bag and prepares to walk away, Zhuli wonders how he is seemingly able to agree with the Red Guard’s policies without compromising his values. She thinks to herself that it is impossible to play revolutionary **music** with fear in one’s heart—“every note would be abject, weak, a lie.” Zhuli walks to the park, where she mulls over the coming campaign as she hears demonstrators shouting slogans. She feels that she will be targeted. Soon, she runs into Tofu Liu, another student at the Conservatory. To her surprise, Tofu asks her if she would like to work on a Prokofiev duet with him, and Zhuli agrees.

Before Tofu leaves, Zhuli asks him what is happening with the campaign. Tofu responds that the same thing happens to each generation—he thinks that the demonstrations that are occurring have been repeated in different forms throughout history. He questions the motivations of the demonstrators. “If some people say what is in their hearts and other people say what glides easily off the tongue, how can we talk to one another? We will never find common purpose, I believe in the Party, of course, and I don’t want to lose faith. I will never lose faith...”

In this passage, Thien illustrates the different ways in which Kai and Zhuli navigate the Cultural Revolution. While Kai seems willing to play only the pieces of music that the government has deemed appropriate, Zhuli is less keen to give up on pursuing her individual tastes in music, and seems to resent being forced to play only propagandistic songs. Her exaggeration—saying she’ll play ‘The Internationale’ for “all of eternity” drives home her unhappiness with this setup. She seems to perceive that Kai, unlike her, is on the Red Guards’ side—she thinks playing revolutionary music will make him, in particular, happy.



Here, Zhuli’s thinking demonstrates that she understands the performative nature of her colleagues’ revolutionary thinking. Her observation that it is “impossible to play revolutionary music with fear in one’s heart” is very astute—indeed, revolutions demand courage, critical thinking, and independent thought. Through detailing Zhuli’s reaction to the Cultural Revolution, Thien highlights how the so-called “revolutionary culture” of Mao’s regime is deeply performative and therefore, hypocritical.



Thien establishes Tofu Liu as another character committed to independent, critical thought. He, too, realizes that his “revolutionary” classmates are not thinking deeply about revolution; rather, they are repeating the same slogans they’ve heard their whole life. In comparing them to people who say “what is in their hearts,” Tofu gets to the root of the tension between free speech and propaganda.



Meanwhile, Sparrow is on his way to a meeting that Kai has invited him to on the other side of town. Inside, the apartment is small and dark and the **radio** is blaring. Someone asks Sparrow if he was followed and another person asks for his ID. But other, lighthearted members of the group discount these questions as paranoia, and soon the conversation turns to books. Most of the people are foreign. A young woman named Ling picks up a book by Fredrich Schiller and begins to read aloud. Someone requests a copy of the book, and people are reluctant to volunteer to copy it. Sparrow says that he'll do it. As they talk, the radio keeps playing, and on it, the announcer repeats, "Those representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army, and various spheres of culture are a group of counter-revolutionary revisionists..."

The next day at the Conservatory, Zhuli arrives in class only to discover that it appears to be cancelled. Only six of the 50 enrolled students are present, and the professor is missing. When Zhuli walks in, none of the students there lift their heads to greet her. Downstairs, she hears shouting and people storming through the classrooms. She hears furniture being broken in the rooms above her. Zhuli had been listening to someone play the piano but suddenly she hears the instrument being smashed, followed by the smell of flames. At that point, she hurries home. That night, Ba Lute instructs Zhuli to cut her hair—having a long braid, he thinks, is "a symbol of vanity."

The next morning, Zhuli wakes up feeling alone in the city. She goes, again to the Conservatory, and on her way she passes a wall on which someone has written, "IF THE FATHER IS A HERO, SO IS THE SON! IF THE FATHER IS A COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY, THE SON MUST BE A SON OF A BITCH! DIG OUT THE CHILDREN OF RIGHTISTS, CAPITALIST ROADERS, AND COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARIES [...] LONG LIVE THE GREAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION!"

Thien juxtaposes the propaganda on the radio with the subversive circle Sparrow and Kai are participating in. While the radio blasts violent propaganda in support of the Cultural Revolution, the group's members read aloud foreign texts that the government likely would deem counterrevolutionary. The radio serves as a tool that disguises them in expressing their freedom of thought—surely, the neighbors will not expect that in a household so attentive to what's on the radio, people are reading counterrevolutionary books.



The attacks on the Conservatory have begun, and the climate of fear among the students comes through clearly in this passage. None of Zhuli's classmates raise their heads to meet her gaze likely because they do not want her to be able to identify them as being among the less revolutionary-minded students who went to class instead of protesting. Furthermore, Ba Lute's insistence that a long braid is a symbol of "vanity" furthers readers' understanding of revolutionary politics as performative; clearly, whether someone has long hair or not has nothing to do with what their political beliefs are. And yet, the revolutionary movement seems more concerned with the superficial than the sincere.



Zhuli feels alone in the city because she fundamentally disagrees with the way that the Cultural Revolution is taking place, but because expressing her opinion is dangerous, she is unable to share these beliefs with anyone. In this way, the government's policies isolate her from her community. The poster on the wall solidifies the class inequality that continues to exist under communism—the children of "rightists" have no opportunity to prove their revolutionary-mindedness to society and are judged simply by virtue of who their parents are. This is a fundamentally unequal setup that leads to clear social class distinctions.



Sparrow, already at the Conservatory, is working on his composition in his office when Kai enters. Sparrow accuses him of not attending class the day before—in fact, only two students showed up. Kai tells Sparrow that he must be the only one in the building, and Sparrow reminds himself that he is “the eldest son of a revolutionary hero,” and, consequentially, he has no reason to be afraid. Sparrow notices that Kai wears a crimson armband on his sleeve and he asks if Kai has joined the Red Guards. “People like me don’t join anymore,” Kai responds, “We are Red Guards, that’s all.” By this, Kai meant people “with revolutionary class backgrounds.” The two stay in Sparrow’s office, talking for hours. Eventually, they fall asleep on the floor. Kai holds Sparrow tightly and he rests his mouth against Sparrow’s neck.

Kai invites Zhuli to the next underground meeting at one of Kai’s friend’s apartments along with Sparrow. The Old Cat greets them warmly, giving Zhuli a big hug. Surprised to see so many books, Zhuli asks the Old Cat if she isn’t worried about “busybodies.” The Old Cat responds that she’ll need to soundproof her walls. That night, the group decides to read a selection of passages from [Faust](#). Sparrow interprets the reading as being about “seeking a freedom within the mind that would expand [one’s] spirit as well as [one’s] intelligence.”

Once they’ve set down Faust, however, someone picks up a copy of the *Beijing Review*, in which philosophy students at Beijing University have published a column: “All revolutionary intellectuals, now is the time to go into battle! Resolutely, thoroughly, totally and completely wipe out all the ghosts and monsters.” The Old Cat says there’s no need to read the article aloud—it’s the same stuff they hear on the loudspeakers. But Kai disagrees. He agrees with the young revolutionaries, who say the Chinese people need to “purge [them]selves [...] of individualism, privilege.” A member of the group disagrees with Kai, and abruptly, Kai stands and he says he can no longer listen to the conversation. He tells the hosts that they are putting everyone here in danger. He leaves, and Sparrow goes after him.

Zhuli stays behind and keeps talking with the Old Cat and the other members of the group. At first they venture away from the topic of politics, but inevitably they begin discussing the new campaign again. The Old Cat believes that those identified as “enemies of the People” are really just unlucky. Zhuli defends those who participate in the revolution, reminding the Old Cat that if a neighborhood turns in a single counter-revolutionary family, they might save their whole block from persecution at the hands of the authorities.

In this moment, it is clear that Sparrow believes that he is safe from the Red Guards due to his father’s status—a further indication of class inequality in his society. What’s more, Kai seems to have automatically joined or been initiated into the Red Guards, also due to his parents’ actions. However, it seems that because Kai comes from a rural class background, he has a higher social status than Sparrow, who does not. Their different class backgrounds shape the way they engage with the Cultural Revolution.



The passage they read in the group, on Sparrow’s read, is about the importance of individual, critical thinking—the very thing that is under attack by the government in this cultural moment. Zhuli asking the Old Cat about “busybodies” indicates the high level of alertness and paranoia that she needs to safely navigate a society in which people so often spy on one another.



The contrast between the poor writing in the Beijing Review and the literary quality of Faust highlights the differences between propaganda—which seeks primarily to convey a simplistic message—and literature, which seeks universal truth through the artistic use of language. The type of thinking that the student piece in the paper exhibits through her writing directly contrasts with the type of thinking Sparrow imagines when reading Faust. While he prizes critical thought, she regurgitates “the same stuff” everyone hears on the radio.



The Old Cat astutely observes that the people targeted in the Cultural Revolution are fundamentally no more or less revolutionary than those who attack them; rather, those who lack social status, she seems to imply, are those who are the victims of the attack. Zhuli rightly observes that many of the spies and Red Guards are likely acting out of fear that their families will be persecuted, rather than genuine conviction that it is right to participate in the movement.



Sparrow catches up with Kai on his bicycle, and Kai begs him to understand why he left the meeting, saying he has to “draw a clear line” to protect his family. “We must trust the Party with everything,” Kai tells his friend before pedaling off. Once Kai is gone, Sparrow is suddenly inspired to keep working on his composition and he heads to the Conservatory. As he makes his way over to his office, he thinks to himself that in the span of just a few days, the Shanghai he grew up in has changed forever.

Indeed, Sparrow soon comes across a demonstration that the Red Guards are putting on. Even though it is raining, he finds himself in the middle of a huge crowd that has gathered outside to take part in the protest. In the middle, he sees an old man standing on a chair, the crowd pressing in closer and closer. Meanwhile, a girl holding a broom paces back and forth in front of the old man, mocking him. She accuses him of “teaching literary works that mock[] the reality of every man and woman standing before him.”

In the crowd, Sparrow hears words like “counter-revolutionary” and “demon” being tossed around. The girl begins to use the broom to beat the old man, who is shaking with cold and drenched from the rain. Another member of the Red Guard steps forward to put a dunce cap on the old man, on which it is written, “I am an enemy of the People, a spreader of lies! I am a demon!” The girl forces the old man to repeat after her, phrases like “I have fed foreign shit to [my students’] bright and beautiful minds” and even “I deserve death.” The crowd throws the old man’s books and papers onto an ever-growing fire, and the girl continues beating him. When she gets tired, a boy replaces her. He takes a razor to the old man’s head, shaving off his long white hair.

Sparrow sees Zhuli in the crowd, carrying her violin. He immediately thinks that she shouldn’t be in such a space with her instrument and he walks toward her to take her home. He tries to steer them in the direction of their family’s house, but Zhuli is intent upon going to the Conservatory—she can’t seem to memorize the Ravel that she needs to learn for her next performance. Along the way, the two cousins come across various members of the Red Guard. When they do, Sparrow shouts to them about the demonstration going on in the center. “The coward has already pissed himself!” he says.

In this moment, Kai confirms that he prioritizes his association with the Red Guards over his association with the study group. In this way, he chooses safety at the expense of moral depravity, lack of free expression, and dissociation from one of his communities. This is a clear character difference between Sparrow and Kai—Sparrow values all of that which Kai is willing to give up.



Here, the Red Guards demonstrate that they see literature as a means of direct, political communication rather than a medium for artistic communication, complex thought, and abstract messages. The idea that a literary work could “mock” the realities of all the people standing at the demonstration is absurd. It is unlikely that any literary work would directly mock so many people.



By having the old man be a professor of literature, Thien frames the Cultural Revolution as an attack on storytelling—and, by consequence, the preservation of history—as well as an attack on freedom of expression. What’s more, the fact that he is elderly only highlights the Red Guards’ cruelty and disregard for human life. They humiliate and punish him rather than opening up an honest dialogue with him, in which he could defend himself and maybe even come to see their side. By casting him as an “enemy of the People,” the Red Guards create an “us vs. them” climate of political fear and division.



In this moment, Zhuli demonstrates her strong commitment to her musical practice—a core aspect of her identity—by running the risk of being seen in public with a violin and therefore labelled a counterrevolutionary. For her, music is consistently a priority over superficial political engagement. Sparrow, on the other hand, seems more intent upon survival, and disregards his personal beliefs that oppose the Red Guards in order to protect himself and Zhuli from attack.



When Sparrow and Zhuli arrive at home, they find Ba Lute staring out the window. He is startled when they walk in, and he tells them that the Red Guards are going door by door to every house. Zhuli reminds her uncle that he is a Party member, but Sparrow quickly counters that the man being tortured in the center of the city is, too. Ba Lute recalls how, at Party meetings, he once encouraged the Party members to give a reward to those citizens willing to surrender their counter-revolutionary compatriots over to government hands. Eventually, he leaves the room, seeming small despite his large frame. “In everything, I trust the Party,” he says, “I trust Chairman Mao. But no, no. I never wanted this.”

Sparrow and Zhuli remain in the living room, sitting in uncomfortable silence. Zhuli tells her cousin that she saw he’d been denounced, and he responds that the Conservatory’s entire faculty has been denounced. “They can’t shoot all of us,” he reasons. Zhuli shares with Sparrow that yesterday, on her way out of the Conservatory, Zhuli’s classmates surrounded her, grabbed her violin, and taunted her. She told them that she was a patriot, but they jeered “The butterfly belongs to no country.” Luckily, Tofu Liu arrived and ran away with Zhuli. Zhuli reflects that it is strange that they were the ones running—after all, the Red Guards “are the ones afraid of a world they can’t control.”

In response, Sparrow forbids Zhuli from practicing in the Conservatory, but Zhuli asks what she should do if not practice. Kai, she says, is a Red Guard now—he led the attack on Tofu Liu’s parents and he was with the group of classmates that surrounded and attacked her. But Sparrow insists that Kai could not have led the attack on Tofu’s home, lying that Kai was with him all of the previous night. Disappointed that her cousin doesn’t believe her, Zhuli reflects in silence now on the attacks. She thinks to herself that without **music**, if the Red Guards prevented her from being able to play and practice, she would die. Before going to bed, she tells her cousin, “These are professors’ lodgings [...] Even if they don’t come here tonight, we’re like eggs in a nest.” Sparrow says nothing but he reminds himself that Zhuli is a child and that “children would not be harmed. Children, the Charmian said, carried the seeds of the revolution.”

In this moment, Ba Lute reveals the way in which he and other older Party members have been out phased by the new generation of Communists. He admits to having supported the policies that encourage spying—and therefore divide communities—but now that he is seeing the effects of this action, he clearly regrets having supported the policy. It is clear that association with the Party will no longer protect people, which suggests that a new order is coming to power.



The fact that all of the Conservatory’s faculty have been denounced illuminates the sweeping extent of the Red Guards’ activity. It also shows that having an artistic profession alone is enough to make someone a counterrevolutionary, which, in turn, concretizes the idea that art and freedom of expression are cast as enemies of the people. Because of Zhuli’s class background, she is made the target of her fellow students’ attacks.



Sparrow’s belief that children will not be harmed because they “carry the seeds of the revolution” implies several things. First, he still clearly believes, to some extent, in the moral integrity of the Communist Party—he thinks they won’t go against their own statements and values. Second, it implies that under the Communist Party, a human life is only worthy if it is participating in the revolution. Children, to most, aren’t valuable because they will participate in revolution, but simply because they are human beings.



The next morning before dawn, Zhuli once again makes her way to the Conservatory. She stayed up late the previous night reading Chairman Mao's discourse on art and literature and, although she enjoyed the language, she felt that she fundamentally disconnected with the piece. Zhuli stayed up late writing self-criticism, but not the kind she's accustomed to. The questions central to her criticism were, "Who am I at the base of things?" and, "Do I have the ability to change?"

Inside the Conservatory, Zhuli suddenly hears sounds coming from the basement: someone down there is moaning in pain. She rushes out of the Conservatory and, discovering that she has the family's oil and grain ration coupons in her pockets, she decides to go and pick up their rations—since Big Mother Knife and Swirl left, this is her responsibility. The line for rations is very long; Zhuli stands behind a girl who is barefoot, with a plain, ugly haircut. Red posters cover all the walls of the nearby buildings.

At noon, Zhuli has almost reached the head of the line. She worried that they might run out of oil but she sees the people ahead of her leave with their full quota of food and she feels hopeful. But behind her, there is growing commotion. Focused on the food, Zhuli doesn't turn around, even when she hears a woman fearfully answering the Red Guards in a "sagging E minor tone." But the girl with the blunt haircut in front of Zhuli turns around, so she does too. They see a woman about Swirl's age being pulled from the line by a Red Guard. She is wearing a blouse and a navy skirt, and immediately Zhuli thinks to herself that the woman must be being punished because of her clothing.

Zhuli almost starts giggling nervously, but suddenly, a Red Guard shoves the woman in front of Zhuli. "Slap her insolent face," the Red Guard commands. Zhuli freezes. The Red Guard keeps screaming at her, and Zhuli's neighbors in the ration line encourage her to slap the woman. "We all have lessons to learn, don't hesitate!" the man next to her says. Zhuli lifts her right hand to slap the woman, but nothing happens, so the Red Guard starts criticizing Zhuli too. "Little capitalist spy," she calls her, "Stinking whore!"

Zhuli again demonstrates her commitment to free thought and creative expression. Although she tries to engage with revolutionary ideology by reading and responding to Mao's piece, she still grapples with central questions of individual identity. This shows her strong sense of self and her resilience. Even though she lives in a society that seeks to deny its citizens selfhood, she remains committed to expressing and understanding her identity.



In this passage, readers realize that the Red Guards are likely torturing people within the Conservatory. Zhuli hearing sounds of moaning coming from the basement is ominous. Thien mentions the use of rations to expose readers to one of the government's efforts to equalize society across classes—with rations, everyone has access to the same amount and type of food.



Thien juxtaposes one girl's ugly haircut with another woman's beautiful clothes. This harkens back to Ba Lute's suggestion that Zhuli cut her hair—to the Red Guards, any effort to look nice is seen as counterrevolutionary. Additionally, Thien's reference to the woman's "sagging E minor tone" reminds readers of the way that Zhuli's colleagues criticized her for favoring counterrevolutionary music.



This scene is a clear example of the Red Guards dividing the people to conquer them. They create an "us vs. them" mentality among the people, who recognize that if they're not with the Red Guards, they're against them, and being against the Red Guards puts them in danger. This is why Zhuli's neighbors in line encourage her to slap the other woman—they know that by resisting, Zhuli is endangering herself.



Meanwhile, young people have started raiding the distribution warehouse, pulling out the workers and shouting merrily, “Cleanly, quickly, cut off their heads!” Zhuli is shocked—she has no idea how such a large crowd has formed so quickly. Beside her, the barefoot girl gives her advice: “Just shout the slogans,” she whispers. “Quickly! They’re watching you. Oh, why are you so afraid?” The line for the food rations dissolves and morphs into a mob, which Zhuli feels protects her from the wild Red Guards. But soon, she finds herself in another line of old women, mothers, and young girls being pushed to their knees by swaggering Red Guards. One of the Guards has scissors and she yanks each woman’s head back to cut off large clumps of hair, all the while criticizing them. “Disgusting bitches,” she calls them. Zhuli, dissociating, comes in and out of awareness.

Soon, the Red Guards are in front of Zhuli, and one of them says, “Oh, this is the violinist. The stuck-up bitch whose father is a counter-revolutionary.” They rip Zhuli’s bag away from her and its contents fall: a Beethoven score scatters across the street. The Red Guards stomp on the pages and, pretending to read them, begin to sing. One of them arrives with a bucket of black ink or paint, throwing it all over the women they’ve forced to kneel on the ground. The Red Guards jeer and spit on members of the crowd. After the being slapped a dozen or so times, Zhuli simply begins to lose feeling in her body.

As Zhuli begins to lose consciousness, she thinks again of the time that she got her parents in trouble by being discovered in the family’s hidden library. She wonders if it is this crime that the Red Guards are able to see inside her, if it is for this that she is being punished. She thinks to herself, “Every slap, kick, and humiliation that I receive is one less for my mother.” Soon, the Red Guards gather and focus on Zhuli—it seems to Zhuli that she is the only one still kneeling on the ground. They demand that she confess, slapping her head continuously. “Open your mouth, you demon!” they scream.

Eventually, the Red Guards leave Zhuli. When Zhuli is alone, she thinks to herself that she is now ready “to bring all these flowers [...] for [she] will find all the flowers, even if [she] must steal them from the hands of [their] Great Leader, and [she] will lay them at Prokofiev’s feet.” She remembers that she has dedicated her entire life to **music**—now, she thinks to herself, “the quiet would show her the way out. Silence would expand into a desert, a freedom, a new beginning.”

The Red Guards’ choice to raid the distribution warehouse undermines their moral integrity. If they truly believed in Communist values, they would not undermine the equal distribution of food by stealing more than their fair share of rations. On another note, the barefoot girl’s advice to Zhuli—“Just shout the slogans!”—goes to show just how meaningless the slogans really are. They’re not heartfelt statements of agreement with the Communist Party—they’re meaningless phrases people say primarily to protect themselves from becoming victims of political violence.



Again, the Red Guards reference Zhuli’s association with her father as a reason that she is stuck-up and needs to be beaten, illustrating their obsession with social class. They judge Zhuli not just on her actions but also on the actions of her parents. What’s more, they incriminate her simply because she plays violin, which sheds further light on their characterization of music as a whole as counterrevolutionary.



In this moment, although she is alone, isolated from her family and community and abandoned by any citizens who could protect her, Zhuli is in some way connected to her mother. The fact that Zhuli thinks that in being punished by the Red Guards she is reducing her mother’s punishment shows how strongly bonded she feels to Swirl, even though they are physically miles apart.



In this moment, Zhuli’s decision that she will take flowers from Chairman Mao and lay them at Prokofiev’s feet is a commitment to live for music, for her art, without pretending to care about the Communist politics that everyone around her has dedicated themselves to. She seems to feel a lot of clarity around her commitment to dedicate her life to music, the most important part of her identity.



Hours later, Zhuli regains consciousness. It is now dark, and she is still on the pavement. She can't feel her fingers and she thinks to herself that they have gone to gather her hair, which the Red Guards chopped off hours earlier. Ink has dried in Zhuli's eyes and they are now crusted shut—she is totally unable to open them. She feels a trickle of water on her eyes and lips and she hears Kai's voice. Zhuli distrusts him and she feels fearful, but at the same time she mourns the fact that she and Kai will never be able to be the lifelong **musical** collaborators that she dreamed they might one day become. She is full of both love and fear for him and she thinks of the “solitude that comes from being at odds with oneself. It is loneliness.”

Zhuli loses sense of time and she wakes up to hear Ba Lute speaking and Flying Bear crying. She hears Kai saying that the two women targeted at the demonstration earlier have died. One of them was “dragged along the pavement for a kilometer.” Zhuli feels a breeze against her skin and she realizes that Sparrow is washing her. Soon after, Red Guards arrive at the house, and Zhuli hears shouting, a neighbor crying. One of Zhuli's ears has been damaged and she wonders to herself “what would persist” without **music** and words. She imagines that in her next lifetime, there will be more colors than in the human world. In the middle of the night, Zhuli wakes up, gets out of bed, and walks outside.

Sparrow, who's fallen asleep beside Zhuli in a chair, hears her wake up and leave. He feels he cannot move he and worries that Zhuli will see the posters that Ba Lute forced Flying Bear and Da Shan to write denouncing Zhuli, Swirl, and Wen the Dreamer. Ba Lute told his younger sons to call Zhuli “the daughter of rightist filth” and Ba Lute plans to paste the posters in front of the house come morning.

At this point, Ba Lute has been summoned to the “struggle sessions” at the Conservatory twice. He returned with his entire body bruised and his face bloody and lopsided. Still, Ba Lute insists that the “criticism” he has received is far better than the punishments reserved for convicted rightists—even the rehabilitated ones like Swirl. Sparrow, too, had been taken by the Red Guards, but he was just locked in a room at the Conservatory. No one came to beat or even criticize him. Sparrow observes that the counterrevolutionaries who had already been targeted during Red Guard demonstrations are targeted again and again. He thinks of the family of a famous writer who has translated Balzac and Voltaire: the Red Guards have burned all of the writer's books and destroyed his family's piano.

In this moment, Zhuli recognizes that Kai, due to his hypocrisy, is not trustworthy—this is why she meets his arrival with fear and suspicion, even though she desperately needs someone's help. However, Zhuli demonstrates her compassion by recognizing how painful it must be for him to wear his two identities. She knows that at his core, Kai cares about music, but that he feels unable to advocate for what he believes in due to the violence of the political moment.



The fact that the Red Guards would drag someone along the pavement for a mile shows their extremism and intention to punish rather than constructively reform those whom they see as “rightists.” Zhuli's vision for the future world, on the other hand, demonstrates her dedication to creating art. Her desire for “more colors” can be read both as a desire for more beauty and as a wish for more diversity in creative expression and opinion—especially since the ubiquitous color red is associated with communism, Zhuli's desire for more colors can be seen as a wish for political and ideological diversity.



Although Ba Lute has asked his youngest sons to denounce Zhuli only out of a desire to protect his family, his willingness to perpetuate the cruel rumors about Zhuli illustrates how deeply the Red Guards' violence is able to separate and divide families.



Ba Lute being taken in for “criticism”—the word he uses to describe what is clearly torture—shows that the Communist Party has greatly changed its value system since he was considered a hero. What's more, the fact that what someone like Swirl would experience would be worse than Ba Lute's obviously egregious torture emphasizes the Red Guards' violence. Sparrow is likely being protected by Kai when he isn't tortured—which, again, shows how personal connections and relationships are more important than ideological tendencies for the Red Guards.



When Sparrow wakes up in the morning, he sees Zhuli sitting in bed and he observes that her short hair makes her look even younger. She asks her cousin if he's seen her violin, and he tells her that it has been destroyed—when the Red Guards came to the house, they smashed all of the instruments. He tells her that Da Shan and Flying Bear have left the city to stay with Ba Lute's cousin, but Zhuli counters, saying that the demonstrations are everywhere. Sparrow chooses not to reveal to Zhuli that within the last week, four Conservatory professors have killed themselves.

Zhuli starts telling Sparrow about how prideful she has been, how she believed that one day she would perform for Chairman Mao and travel the world as a violinist. She tells him that it was for this pride that her classmates have mocked her. But Zhuli is committed to her dreams. "I don't know anymore," she tells Sparrow, "I never stopped loving my country but I want to be loyal to something else, too." Zhuli reaches under the bed and pulls out Chapter 17 of **The Book of Records**, saying that she'd hidden it from Ba Lute. She tells Sparrow how much *The Book of Records* makes her think of her father and she makes Sparrow promise not to let Ba Lute burn the notebooks.

At that moment, Wen has just arrived in Yumen City. For the past two years, he has been crossing and re-crossing the Northwest region of the country. His time in the re-education camps and on the run has transformed him: no longer young and bookish, he is tan, lithe, and prematurely aged. Each month, Wen steals another stranger's identity card, occasionally stopping to work at a farm when he needs food or money. One day, Wen came across Chapter 6 of **The Book of Records** in a village. He found a clue left in the book telling him to go to another city, where he found yet another chapter. In this way, he eventually arrived at Notes from the Underground, Lady Dostoevsky's plant and flower clinic.

There, Lady Dostoevsky told Wen the Dreamer that Swirl and Big Mother Knife are waiting for him in Yumen City, where they work with the local song and dance troupe. So now, in Yumen City, Wen appears at the sisters' home—he yearns to see his wife but he is "afraid of the cessation of his loneliness." Eventually, Wen knocks on the door and reunites with Swirl. That same night, the two leave, planning to escape into Mongolia, where Wen has contacts that will help them cross the country. Big Mother Knife writes a letter to Zhuli saying that her parents have been reunited and have escaped. The next morning, Big Mother Knife goes to the local Party secretary and tells him that Swirl has fallen into a river and drowned. Within five days, the search team hasn't found a body, and Swirl is pronounced dead.

Here, the Red Guards' political violence again separates families—Da Shan and Flying Bear must leave the city in order to be safe from the Guards' rampages. Furthermore, the fact that the Red Guards have destroyed Zhuli's violin symbolizes their attempt to destroy not only her freedom to express herself artistically, but also to destroy a core aspect of her identity.



In this passage, Zhuli articulates her commitment to expressing her own identity to Sparrow. While everyone around her has either been coerced into claiming to love first and foremost their country or genuinely feels that way, Zhuli resists the cultural urge to put China before her own needs and desires. The "something else" she likely refers to is music. What's more, by begging Sparrow not to let Ba Lute burn The Book of Records, Zhuli keeps with family tradition in prioritizing storytelling and intergenerational connection over even her own safety.



Wen the Dreamer arriving at Notes from the Underground as a plot point is in dialogue with Zhuli's begging Sparrow not to destroy The Book of Records just moments before. The Book of Records, although Zhuli doesn't know it, has successfully reunited her mother and father. By placing these two events so close together in the plot, Thien almost implies that Zhuli is connected to her parents in such a way that she remembers the importance of The Book of Records just as The Book of Records proves its importance to Wen and Swirl.



Wen the Dreamer's fear of "the cessation of his loneliness" just goes to show how used to isolation he has become. Indeed, after suffering through re-education camps and saving his life by leaving, Wen the Dreamer has been forced into isolation just to survive. His experience is evidence of the government's cruel practices. Big Mother Knife's choice to lie to the government shows how little she is able to trust them. Thien's choice to have Swirl die in order to escape the government raises an interesting point about the need to give up one's identity, in one way or another, to survive under the government.



Back in Shanghai, the Red Guards have come for Sparrow once again, and this time they keep him in custody for a week. Zhuli, too, is taken several times. When Sparrow is in the Red Guard's custody, he is simply placed in a room in isolation and then, inexplicably, let go. The loudspeakers never stop blaring outside, and the family hears news that playwright once celebrated as "the People's artist" has drowned himself. The loudspeakers play "joyful marching **music**" to celebrate his death. It is during this broadcast that the Red Guards arrive once more at the family's home to take Zhuli, in spite of Sparrow's protests.

At the hands of her classmates, Zhuli is forced to repeat slogans, beaten with conductor's batons, and shaved with a razor. They are creative with their torture tactics. Constantly singing, the Red Guards' favorite song goes, "The water of socialism nourished me, I grew up beneath the Red Flag / I took the oath / To dare to think, to speak, to act, / To devote myself to revolution."

Zhuli can't bear the way her classmates—Kai among them—look at her with contempt and disgust. In front of everyone, Kai announces that Zhuli cares more about **music** and her personal wishes than the Party, sharing that he "had tried to instruct her on the correct works," copying out more appropriate musical material for her by hand. He condemns Zhuli for refusing to denounce her rightist parents, calling her loose and immoral. "All passions should be subsumed to the revolution," he adds. For all of his talking, Kai never mentions Sparrow's name.

It is Sparrow who brings Zhuli home that evening. Sparrow weeping uncontrollably—Zhuli has never seen him so emotional, and it frightens her. Still, she feels safe in his arms. She recognizes that Kai is protecting Sparrow from suffering the same fate to which Zhuli is being subjected. Zhuli longs to ask Kai many questions, to tell him that no matter what happens, one day he will be alone, and will have to be accountable to himself for his actions.

In this moment, Thien's reference to the "joyful marching music" played on the loudspeakers when the formerly renowned playwright kills himself harkens back to the "revolutionary" G and C major key songs that Zhuli committed to play on the violin when her classmates accused her of preferring music that was too apolitical. In this instance, readers see propagandistic art—the music—coming directly at heads with the playwright's freer, more creative artistic expression.



Here, the song Zhuli's classmates force her to sing directly contrasts with the vow she made to herself days before—that she wants to be loyal to something beyond just her country. The song, by contrast, implies that one's entire life should be devoted to their country and socialist revolution.



In this passage, Kai reveals himself to be two-faced and a traitor. His friendship with Zhuli—even his romantic interest in Zhuli—is less important to him than being on the right side of the revolution. This shows the ways in which the Red Guards' activity sabotages human relationships. Kai's statement that all passions should be dedicated to the revolution furthers the attack on individual identity that is taking place in Zhuli's torturing.



Zhuli's thinking that one day Kai and the rest of the Red Guards will have to account for their actions in solitude reflects her continued respect for the individual experience. She recognizes that the Red Guards' cruelty is only possible because they are acting as a mob, and that, alone, they wouldn't have the courage to do what they are doing—nor, she seems to think, would they see it as moral. She recognizes that no matter how group-oriented they are now, they will never escape the reckoning as individuals with their actions and choices.



The next morning, Zhuli wakes up early and she puts on her favorite dress. She pins down the rough parts of her short hair, thanking the gods of silence that Sparrow and Ba Lute do not wake up. She makes her way to the Conservatory, observing the small fires that burn along the roadside, an intersection where books have been placed in enormous piles. Posters are everywhere. When Zhuli enters the Conservatory, she begins to tear down the denunciation posters that crowd the walls. Instead of tearing down the last one, she decides to write over it a passage from a novel. She “[writes] directly overtop of the denunciations [...] so that ‘brother’ appear[s] over ‘leader,’ ‘vague,’ over ‘reactionary,’ and ‘high bluffs’ [sits] overtop ‘demon-exposing mirror.’ She thinks to herself that these are “borrowed words over borrowed words [...] all attached to one another now.”

When Zhuli is finished writing on the poster, she heads to Sparrow’s office. She thinks to herself that he will understand, although inside she knows this may not be true. She puts one of Sparrow’s Bach records on the player. Zhuli thinks to herself that she knows who she is, that “before they [break] her down, she wish[es] to choose a future and to leave.” She wonders what would become of her if the Red Guards took away her **music** or broke her hands. As soon as the record finishes playing, Zhuli removes a rope from her pocket and climbs onto Sparrow’s desk. She attaches the rope to a pipe and pushes the desk away but leaves the chair in its place. She thinks of Sparrow, that she is both abandoning and protecting him by leaving this life. She lets go.

That morning, Sparrow wakes up while it is still dark. He thinks to himself that Zhuli has gone to see the Old Cat—there would be no other reason for her to leave so early. Before leaving the house, Sparrow puts on Da Shan’s red armband to make himself “invisible.” He walks to the Conservatory.

Thien makes many intentional choices in this moment that highlight Zhuli’s commitment to artistic expression and her own identity. First, Zhuli’s brave choice to wear a pretty dress could get her in trouble with the Red Guards, but she does it anyway because she values being able to express herself through her appearance. Secondly, the words that she writes over the poster directly contrast with the poster itself. By substituting “brother” for “leader,” Zhuli subtly draws attention to the ways in which the Cultural Revolution has divided families and encouraged people to choose their political values over family and other close relationships. The fact that she chooses to do this with a passage from a novel demonstrates her literally placing art over, or in a more important position, than propaganda.



Zhuli chooses to die because she fears that she will be forced to live without music, without a way in which she can truly express herself. It’s interesting that she frames suicide as choosing a future; it is as though, for Zhuli, life without individual expression through music is not life, but rather, a form of death. She sees more meaning in dying now, having dedicated her entire life to music, than in continuing to live but being unable to do anything that she feels would be artistically fulfilling.



Sparrow’s choice to wear Da Shan’s red armband indicates that he, unlike Zhuli, is willing to make certain compromises to be safe. His choosing to wear the red armband to blend in with the Red Guards directly contrasts with Zhuli’s choice to put on her favorite dress, which would likely provoke the Red Guards.



Only later does Sparrow recognize that he was the one to take the rope from around Zhuli's neck, gather her in his arms, and carry her home. He ran into Ling on the way, and she walked with him—the two passed many Red Guards, but Sparrow felt he could not hear them even when they screamed in his face. Now, at home, Sparrow feels he can hear again—Ba Lute is holding Zhuli's body, calling her name. "What mistakes did we make?" Ba Lute cries. "Didn't we win this country? Didn't we sacrifice ourselves for the Revolution?" He shakes Zhuli as if trying to bring her back to life. Sparrow recalls that when he arrived, the tears on Zhuli's face were wet—had he almost arrived in time? He thinks of Swirl and Wen the Dreamer. Ling places a blanket around Sparrow's shoulders. Sparrow laughs and weeps until midday.

In choosing to be loyal to her own identity, and to what she knows will help her lead a meaningful life, Zhuli has been forced to abandon her family. In her descriptions of Zhuli's suicide, Thien highlights this tension: Zhuli must either choose herself, and consequently, death, or she must choose to be with her family. Zhuli's death is yet another example of families being torn apart by political activity; the only difference from most cases of this is that instead of being killed by the Red Guards, Zhuli took matters into her own hands. The fact that such a young person would feel that suicide is the only way out highlights the extreme violence and cruelty of the regime she has been living under.



CHAPTER 8

Li-ling remembers that, long ago, she and Ai-ming lay together on her bed, Ai-ming holding Chapter 17 of **The Book of Records** in her hands. The story continued even though Ai-ming had stopped reading from the page. Li-ling felt as though Zhuli, older than her but younger than Ai-ming, existed between the two of them. In fact, when they put the book down, Li-ling felt that Zhuli stayed in the room—Li-ling and Ai-ming were the ones to vanish.

Li-ling's sentiment that she disappears while Zhuli stays in the room suggests that she feels deeply connected to the family story that she is reading. This draws readers' attention to the ways in which Zhuli survives through her story being told in The Book of Records, even though her time on Earth was relatively short.



In Shanghai, the September after Zhuli dies, the air is wet and carries the sickly smell of bodies left to rot in public. Ba Lute, again, has been taken by Red Guards and kept for a week—this time, when he returns, he can hardly stand. Sparrow has received a letter from Big Mother Knife saying that Wen the Dreamer and Swirl ("two bags of ribbon," she wrote in the letter) have arrived safely in Mongolia. Ba Lute replies with only three sentences: "Everyone is fine. No need to hurry back. Long live Chairman Mao and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution!"

Ba Lute clearly has fallen entirely out of favor with the Communist Party. The words he uses to write to Big Mother Knife are so dishonest that it is clear that, if he were to tell the truth, he feels he would be in big trouble with the Red Guards and would have no protection from the Party. Big Mother Knife's referring to "two bags of ribbon" also highlights her paranoia about censorship and government spying. Neither is able to express themselves clearly or freely due to the repression they live under.



Two months later, Sparrow goes with Kai to a high-ranking Party official's home: it seems like a whole different country, with stained glass windows and even a piano. The official serves them a feast and he suggests that Sparrow and Kai come perform with the Conservatory in Beijing. Afterward, Kai plays the piano, and the official tells him that the Beijing conductor has asked especially for Kai—not only is he the best pianist in Shanghai, but he comes from an "exemplary" class background.

Thien highlights two forms of class inequality here. First, the fact that the high-ranking official is wealthy enough to afford a feast while people on the street wait in hours-long lines for rations highlights clear corruption within the Party and economic inequality. Secondly, Kai wins favor and privileges from the Party official due to his "exemplary" revolutionary class background. Both forms of inequality speak to corruption and hypocrisy within the government's engagement with communist ideology.



That night, Sparrow sleeps with Kai in his bed. Kai suggests that they should take the official up on his offer and go perform in Beijing. Kai reminds Sparrow that Kai's whole family has died because they came from a village considered so insignificant that the government did nothing to stop the famine that wiped out its population—and Kai won't put himself through that again. But that night, Sparrow recognizes just how different he and Kai are. While Kai, in Sparrow's eyes, is motivated by principally by fear, Sparrow is not. He sees Zhuli that night, and she seems so alive he wonders if he's the one who is an illusion. She tells him, "The only life that matters is in your mind. The only truth is the one that lives invisibly, that waits even after you close the book."

Kai leaves Shanghai that November to be a soloist in Beijing. Even in 1967, though, the Shanghai Conservatory remains closed—in spite of this fact, Sparrow is summoned to a meeting with He Luting's replacement as head of the Conservatory, who tells Sparrow that he is being reassigned to work in a factory in the south of the country. When the new Conservatory head asks Sparrow why he turned down the position in Beijing, Sparrow simply says that he felt he was unworthy of the offer.

Back at home, Da Shan has come back from his stay with Ba Lute's cousin and he is sitting at the kitchen table writing denunciations—his poster is four feet long. When Da Shan was with his extended family, to make up for the "impure elements within their family," he led attacks on teachers and other classmates. Flying Bear, in turn, declared that Zhuli was guilty because only the guilty would kill themselves. He tells this to Sparrow, curious to hear his older brother's response. When Sparrow doesn't reply, Da Shan joins in, "Is it true?" he asks. "If Zhuli was really a traitor, she deserved everything that happened," Da Shan says. Da Shan expects Sparrow to hit him, but all Sparrow does is put a hand on his younger brother's shoulder and tell him to make sure he's "worthy of the Red Guards." "That's your only family now, isn't it?" he asks.

Da Shan bursts into tears. He tells Sparrow that he's worse than Zhuli—at least Zhuli knew she was a traitor, he says, but in his eyes, Sparrow is a coward for doing nothing to protect her. Da Shan vows that the Red Guard will come after Sparrow next and that no one will be able to save him.

Sparrow and Kai's strong differences in character come through here. Kai is so motivated by fear, that he is willing to sacrifice his personal values and principles in order to get ahead. He is an opportunist, while Sparrow—although not as committed to individual values and creative expression as Zhuli—is still dedicated to his own moral integrity. The message he hears from the imaginary Zhuli highlights the existence of an absolute, moral truth that is accessible through individual intellect and creativity, one that has nothing to do with whatever the messages of contemporary propaganda happen to be.



In this moment, Sparrow does choose his own freedom, but in a way that is much different from Zhuli. Because in order to play music Sparrow would need to be complicit in a values system that he disagrees with, he chooses to give up his passion for composing in order to maintain his moral integrity. It is unlikely that Sparrow truly felt unworthy of the Beijing offer; rather, he feels that the offer was unworthy of him.



Here, Thien illuminates how the Red Guards have succeeded in dividing Sparrow's family. Da Shan and Flying Bear, perhaps because they are younger, are clearly more susceptible to the Red Guards' propaganda than the other family members. Da Shan led Red Guard attacks while staying with his extended family to make up for his immediate family's association with rightists, which likely is how the Red Guards gain many new members—people trying to protect their own families by destroying others'. Da Shan believes the propaganda to such an extent that he imagines his cousin "deserved" to commit suicide at age 14. Sparrow rightly asserts the fact that the Red Guards have replaced Da Shan's real family—they determine his values and with whom he associates. This, likely, is the organization's intention.



Here, Da Shan cracks. There is clearly a part of him that knows what happened to Zhuli is wrong, but having been so immersed in the Red Guard thinking, he has a hard time accepting that the fault isn't Sparrow's, but instead belongs to the flawed, violent ideology behind the Cultural Revolution.



Sparrow soon begins working at a factory in the south making wooden crates. His body becomes strong and he is constantly covered in dust from the workshop. One day, Sparrow's entire work unit is summoned to a meeting, where they watch the first live broadcast "struggle session" on television. Sparrow is shocked to recognize the Red Guards—former Conservatory students—who drag an elderly man onto the stage. Sparrow recognizes the man as He Luting. As the crowd chants "Kill the traitor!" the Red Guards question their former teacher, but He Luting denies his guilt. As Sparrow watches the conductor being beaten, he remembers something He Luting once said to him: "Music that is immediately understood will not outlast its generation." As He Luting shouts to the Guards, "Shame on you for lying!" the image on television disappears.

Eight months later, Chairman Mao declares that all universities be closed and that the educated, elite youth who were formerly students need to be sent to the countryside to experience rural poverty. In this movement, Sparrow, too, is relocated farther south, this time in the same city as Ling. When he runs into her at the train station, she tells him that Kai, now in Beijing, arranged for them to be placed in the same city.

Big Mother Knife returns to her family's home in 1970, only to find them all missing. Ba Lute, she discovers, has been sent to a re-education camp. When Big Mother Knife visits Ba Lute, he reveals to her that Zhuli committed suicide—all of these years, he had been lying that Zhuli was still alive. Ba Lute tells Big Mother Knife that their own sons, Da Shan and Flying Bear, have denounced him and they want nothing to do with him. "But I have faith that Chairman Mao, our Great Leader, our Saving Star, will redeem us," he adds. This is the only thing he has ever said that makes Big Mother Knife cry.

CHAPTER 7 (II)

In 2016, Li-ling takes another trip to Shanghai, where she begins reading the self-criticisms that weighed down Kai's suitcase when he left China for the first time in 1978. In these, he denounced Zhuli and Sparrow, and, most of all, tried to give up his love for music. Li-ling feels angry when she reads the criticisms, but she pities her father when she remembers to consider his perspective.

He Luting's trial is the first example of public resistance to the Red Guards that appears in the novel. Indeed, even while serving as the director of the Shanghai Conservatory, He Luting demonstrated his value for individual thinking by teaching music the government deemed counterrevolutionary. The quote that Sparrow remembers about music needing to be complex in order to last directly applies to He Luting's situation. While his actions of maintaining his honesty and integrity by denying the false allegations against him are not immediately rewarded by his circumstances, they speak to a moral character that will allow him to live on in collective memory for generations.



Here, readers realize that Kai has become socially powerful after moving to Beijing. The fact that he would be able to determine the cities where his friend are placed for work speaks to corruption within the Communist Party. However, his choice to help his friend Sparrow to become less isolated also reflects the enduring bond between the two, even through separation.



Ba Lute's continued faith in the Communist Party at this point in the novel is something that Big Mother Knife finds pathetic. It indicates that Ba Lute so deeply believes in the Party's propaganda that he is in denial about his own circumstances. He has lost everything—including his freedom and his family—and yet he continues to believe that the ideas expressed in outdated slogans are true. This is likely because Ba Lute has given everything to the Party and no longer has access to his individual critical thinking that would help him see the Party as violent and repressive.



In this moment, Li-ling learns that the way Kai likely achieved the social prominence he had in China was through completely renouncing everything that was important to him. He committed to destroying his own identity and his most personal relationships.



Li-ling has plans in Shanghai: she finally has a lead on her search for Ai-ming and her quest to understand what happened to her family. On WeChat, China's online chatting service, she has been able to contact Tofu Liu, Zhuli's friend from the Conservatory. Now an old man, Tofu Liu invites Li-Ling into his apartment, where he shares with her the story of how he and other members of the Conservatory were affected by the Cultural Revolution. He tells her that not a single piano survived, and that he himself was sent to a re-education camp in the Northwest. There, Tofu worked in a coal mine—an industry in which he had no skill—and many of his coworkers were seriously injured or died. In the camp, the only books they could read were written by Chairman Mao himself. They had to participate in daily self-criticism sessions.

When the Cultural Revolution ended, Tofu Liu went back to Shanghai, where he was able to rejoin the Conservatory, telling his former teacher that he wished to continue playing **music**, "Because music [is] nothing [...] and yet it belongs[ed] to [him]." He said that despite everything, he believed in himself. To this day, Tofu still has a recording of Kai playing the piano, which he plays for Li-ling. Before leaving, Li-ling shows Tofu Liu a photo of Ai-Ming, and he mistakes her for Zhuli. Li-ling takes the recording of her father playing piano with her.

CHAPTER 6 (II)

One day in 1973, Sparrow is pedaling home from work when he hears something unusual on the **radio**: the Philadelphia Orchestra is playing Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. When Sparrow arrives home, his daughter, Ai-ming, runs out to greet him, saying, "It's a new work by Madame Mao!" He corrects her, saying that the composer of the **music** is Beethoven and that he is from another country. Inside, Big Mother Knife, who has relocated to live with Sparrow in the south of China, is rapt, listening to the music.

Young Ai-ming has grown up with Sparrow and her grandmother, Big Mother Knife. Since Ai-ming's mother, Ling, has been transferred to Shanghai for work, Ai-ming often turns to her grandmother as a motherly figure. She loves listening to Big Mother Knife's stories and sleeping on her. Her father, meanwhile, is often quiet, though Ai-ming can't understand why. Since she is "the daughter of a class enemy," she isn't allowed to join the Young Pioneers at school. She is allowed, however, to join her fellow students in reciting essays about how to be a good revolutionary. She herself "[begins] to wonder what [makes] a good father, a good grandmother, a good enemy, a good person." When she looks at her teacher, she wonders if she is a good revolutionary, or a good teacher.

Here, Thien exposes readers both to stories of isolation and separation and of union. Tofu Liu, like so many of his contemporaries, was separated from his family under the cruel and repressive government. However, the fact that he opens his home to Li-ling, a total stranger, based solely on their mutual connection to Zhuli suggests that although he was forced to live away from many people he cared about, his relationships, like his friendship with Zhuli, live on in his heart. It is through moments like this that Thien highlights human resilience and the strength of community even under extremely adverse circumstances.



In this moment, Tofu Liu makes the choice that Zhuli would have made had she survived the Cultural Revolution. By saying that music "is nothing" and yet "belongs to him," Tofu Liu seems to imply that to him, it doesn't matter if music has any significance other than being something that he greatly enjoys. Rather, what's important to him is that he be able to feel fulfillment through creative expression.



That the government would allow the radio to play Beethoven suggests that the worst of the Cultural Revolution is over. The government no longer feels the need to censor everything from a country outside of China. The detail that the young Ai-ming thinks that the piece is by Madame Mao demonstrates the extent to which young children are indoctrinated with propaganda that exaggeratedly praises China's leaders.



Ai-ming has many similarities with Zhuli. First, she, too, is "the daughter of a class enemy" and therefore has a lower social status than her peers. Second, she is also preoccupied with individual identity. Even at such a young age, she recognizes the difference people's political identities and their personal identities. Although she is only exposed to discourse in school that emphasizes one's political engagement, she herself is naturally inclined to explore questions of individual personality, like being "a good grandmother" or a "good person."



One day, Big Mother Knife shows Ai-ming an interesting package. Inside are beautiful clothes—an elegant dress, straw sandals—along with copies of **The Book of Records**. Ai-ming is shocked when she sees the elegant calligraphy, which Big Mother Knife says is extraordinary before quickly correcting herself, explaining that it is not as “robust as Chairman Mao’s.” Soon, Big Mother Knife begins reading *The Book of Records* to her granddaughter. Neither of the two notice the transition from the original story about May Fourth and Da Wei to the parts written by Wen the Dreamer, who picked up where the original author left off. Ai-ming adores the story, and her grandmother writes to Wen the Dreamer, saying that his story has another admirer. Wen the Dreamer imagines that Zhuli is this admirer—Big Mother Knife hasn’t had the courage to tell him or Swirl that their daughter has died.

In September of 1976, Chairman Mao dies. Big Mother Knife walks slowly through the streets, which are lined with white paper flowers, signs of mourning. She thinks of Swirl and Wen the Dreamer, forced into exile; she thinks of her younger sons, who have abandoned their family; she thinks of Sparrow and his factory life “filled with humiliations. Party cadres with[hold] his rations, demand[] self-criticism, scorn[] the way he [holds] his head [...] And her son [has] no choice but to accept it all.” Big Mother Knife weeps, not sad that Chairman Mao has died but rageful that the “old, treacherous man” will never have to answer to his crimes.

One day, Ai-ming and Sparrow receive a visitor in their southern Chinese village. Although Ai-ming has never seen a foreigner before, she knows that the man at the door—with his fancy shoes and differently accented Chinese—is not from their village. Indeed, it is Jiang Kai, comes from Shanghai to pay Sparrow a visit. Ai-ming has never seen her father talk so much to anybody in his life. Jiang Kai brings news about Ling, and the two men reminisce on their days at the Shanghai Conservatory. Sparrow confesses that he feels that what happened to Zhuli was his fault, but Kai assures him that it wasn’t anyone’s fault.

Kai has brought a gift for the family: early the next morning, Ai-ming approaches Sparrow to ask, shyly, “Who built that singing box?” Sparrow responds that it is a record player, and together they listen to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. He teaches Ai-ming her first foreign words: “Bach” and “Glenn Gould.”

Here, Big Mother Knife is the one to introduce Ai-ming to The Book of Records, passing the family tradition of reading and eventually encoding the book onto the next generation. With every new family member who learns about The Book of Records, its power at uniting the family and preserving their stories grows stronger. Indeed, Ai-ming enjoys the sections of the book written by Wen the Dreamer—about his own and his family’s experiences—just as much as she enjoys the fictional parts. This highlights the powerful emotional influence of storytelling as a tool to pass family stories on from generation to generation.



Big Mother Knife’s fury at Chairman Mao’s passing without ever being held accountable to his sins speaks to the fact that she, unlike her husband, has long lost faith in him as a leader. She values her family over political ideology and is consequently deeply upset that her son’s colleagues torture him simply because of his social status, which derives from his association with “convicted rightists.”



Here, the detail that Ai-ming perceives Kai as a “foreigner” suggests that the class difference between him and her family—Kai a successful, influential, urban musician while Sparrow is a rural factory worker—is stark. Also significant here is Kai’s statement that Zhuli’s suicide is no one’s fault, when he was deeply involved in the torture sessions that led to her choice to kill himself. This highlight’s Kai’s immorality.



Kai’s gift to Sparrow’s family allows Ai-ming to learn more about her father’s personality through witnessing his love of music. In this way, Kai has not just gifted the family a record player, but also has gifted Ai-ming in particular with a glimpse of the man her father used to be.



Kai also brought another gift for Sparrow: tickets to an orchestra concert in Shanghai, in which Kai himself will perform. When Sparrow goes, he is nervous; he half expects to be turned away at the door. But he isn't turned away, and once inside, he is surprised to see a young woman in a flowery blouse—he thinks that, years earlier, she would have been criticized as bourgeois for wearing it. Afterward, Sparrow catches up with Kai. The two talk and listen to records. Sparrow chooses Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* and Kai reminds him that the composer was criticized for the fourth movement—according to the Union of Composers, the piece expresses “inauthentic joy.” “But inauthentic joy is also an emotion, experienced by us all,” Sparrow says, to which Kai responds that the censors are always the first to catch an emotion like that.

Playing **music** at Kai's house, Sparrow reflects on his day at the orchestra. He remembers the woman in the floral blouse and he thinks that she watched the orchestra perform with desire and ambition. He knows that he's lost his own drive to play music.

Ai-ming, meanwhile, still has big dreams. Since she first saw a **radio**, she's known that she wants to study computer science at Beijing University. When it comes time for her to take university entrance exams, she studies hard—16 hours a day for a full year. Still, her scores, though impressive, aren't high enough to enter at the Beijing campus. If she wants to attend university, she'll have to stay in her home province. Ai-ming cries for two days straight when she gets the bad news, but Sparrow has a solution: he has requested a transfer to work at his factory's branch in Beijing. If Ai-ming agrees to go with him, the two of them can finally be reunited with Ling, and, what's more, the entrance scores are 100 points lower for Beijing residents. Ai-ming agrees to go, and the two head to Beijing to begin a new life.

Sparrow's anxiety about going to the concert shows how scarred he is from his traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. But his pleasant experience, on the other hand, shows how greatly the Party's policies have changed in the modern age—an inconsistency that shows just how meaningless Sparrow and his family's suffering was during the Cultural Revolution. Sparrow and Kai's commentary on “inauthentic joy” also sheds light on the tension between music's ability—and right—to express the wide range of human emotion and the Party's desire that it express only revolutionary sentiments.



By recognizing himself in the woman's drive and ambition to play music, Sparrow takes the first step on his journey to reclaim music as one of the core parts of his identity.



Here, Ai-ming demonstrates that she's inherited her family's passion for music by showing interest in the radio. Like Sparrow and Zhuli, who worked hard every day in the Conservatory, Ai-ming channels her personal creative and intellectual energy towards studying computer science. She clearly shares with them the curiosity and zest for knowledge that landed them in trouble during the Cultural Revolution. But Ai-ming is lucky to live under a government that is more tolerant and has pathways for her to pursue the work that is most meaningful to her.



CHAPTER 5 (II)

Sparrow and Ai-ming soon settle into a new apartment with Ling, just 15 minutes away from Tiananmen Square. On Ai-ming's 18th birthday, she bikes past the square and admires the architecture and its bright color. She thinks to herself that since she was a child, "right and wrong [have] been represented by the Party through color. Truth and beauty, for instance, [are] *hóng* (red), while criminality and falsehood [are] *hēi* (black). Her mother [is] red, her father [is] black." That night, Ling takes the whole family out to dinner to celebrate at a restaurant near the square. On the way back, they stop to have their picture taken in front of Tiananmen Gate. Ai-ming imagines that her family, dressed in "bland, inoffensive colors," must look like a model family: her mother, a diligent party member, she, the good student, and her father, the factory worker.

Back at home, Ai-ming dedicates all of her time to studying so she can pass the entrance exam at Beijing university. One of her neighbors, Yiwen, is a first-year student at Beijing Normal University and she gives Ai-ming her old textbooks so that Ai-ming can use them to study.

One day while studying, Ai-ming hears news that Hu Yaobang, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, has died. When Sparrow arrives home from work, Ai-ming asks him if he wants to go and bring flowers to Tiananmen Square to mourn Yaobang's death. She reminds him that Yaobang, when asked which of Chairman Mao's policies might be relevant for modern China, said that none of them would be useful. Sparrow warns Ai-ming not to repeat such things, but Ai-ming resists: why can't she say in private what the General Secretary has said openly? While she waits for her father to give her an answer about Tiananmen Square, she listens to the **radio**, on which Red Guards are denouncing the deceased Yaobang.

Outside, Ai-ming sees Yiwen walk by in a pink dress listening to a portable **music** set. Ai-ming thinks that Yiwen is very "modern and deeply Western" for listening to music that only she can hear. "Private music [leads] to private thoughts," Ai-ming thinks. Sparrow says nothing about going to the square, and Ai-ming, although it is still early, goes to bed.

In this moment, Ai-ming's thinking about colors reminds readers of one of Zhuli's dying wishes: that in the "next life" there be more colors. Ai-ming's realization that the Party has used colors to connote simplistic, binary messages about good and bad reflects not only the lack of intellectual and moral complexity, but also the lack of artistic freedom to use colors to signify complex ideas. Thien repeats the motif of colors by highlighting the "bland, inoffensive" colors that the whole family wears in front of Tiananmen Square. Bland, in their society's value system, is associated with good.



Presumably to Ai-ming's class background—being the daughter of a "convicted rightist" up until this point in the story, there has been no mention of her having peers that embraced her as a friend.



This moment is the first time in the story when a government official has publicly said something that the main characters agree with. While up until now Sparrow and his family have been quietly resisting and disagreeing with the Party's policies and values, Ai-ming sees in Hu Yaobang a political figure who to some extent aligns with her own beliefs. This shows the way that the Party's policies are changing, although the mention of the Red Guard propaganda blaring on the radio doesn't speak to the same type of progress.



Yiwen freely wearing the color pink represents her courage in expressing herself through her appearance. From Zhuli's experience with being persecuted for the way she dresses, readers know that Yiwen's "modern" and "Western" ways can be dangerous.



The next morning, Ai-ming runs into Yiwen at the apartment building's water spigot. Yiwen asks her if she plans to go to Tiananmen Square that day, and when Ai-ming asks why, Yiwen assumes she's joking and laughs. That night, Ai-ming sees Yiwen again at the water tap, this time washing dishes. Yiwen tells Ai-ming, whom she calls a "little country girl," about Western rock **music**. She asks her to come to the square tomorrow, and Ai-ming agrees. In the middle of the night, though, she hears Yiwen's parents screaming at her—they are angry that she protested the government in the middle of the night and got arrested. "You had the Revolution to believe in!" Yiwen yells at her parents. "But what do we have?"

The next day, Ling goes to Yaobang's funeral procession, but Ai-ming decides to stay home with Sparrow. The two have a long, slow breakfast, Sparrow reading the newspaper and Ai-ming studying. They listen to the **radio** coverage of the funeral procession: apparently, Tiananmen Square has been closed for the day. Suddenly, though, Sparrow says that he wants to go to the funeral procession, and Ai-ming agrees to accompany him. As they bicycle their way to the event, Ai-ming reveals a dream to her father: she wants to go and study in Canada, or maybe even the United States. Sparrow doesn't have anything to say in response, and in that moment, the two are swept up into a chanting crowd of young people. In call-and-response format, the crowd yells, "Do we love our country? Yes! Are we willing to sacrifice our future for the Chinese people? Yes!"

Ai-ming and Sparrow discover that the night before, 100,000 students had slept in Tiananmen Square because they wanted to be able to use the Square to pay their respects to Hu Yaobang, and yet the government announced that the Square was to be closed that day. What's more, three young men had knelt on the stairs of the Great Hall of the People, holding a petition in the air for the government to read. They wanted a representative from the government to come and meet them, but none arrived. Meanwhile, the Beijing citizens all around the students screamed at them to stand up—why should they choose to meet the government on their knees, as if they were children, and the government their punishing father?

Yiwen's character development reveals her to be a representation of the younger generation's critical thinking and greater courage in resistance than the generation that precedes them. Her affinity for Western rock music parallels Sparrow and Zhuli's affinity for Western classical music, and, with the Cultural Revolution long over, no one is taking away her right to enjoy the music that she privately listens to. Her outburst at her parents likely speaks to Ai-ming's experience as well—while many in the older generation gave their lives to revolution, their children have little to believe in.



In this moment, the courage of Ai-ming's generation shines through. Their willingness to utilize their right to free speech even under such a historically oppressive government demonstrates, if anything, their commitment to revolution and to building the best China that they possibly can. In this moment, freedom of speech and freedom of expression are more powerful than the propaganda that would seek to oppress them. In fact, that the government feels the need to close Tiananmen Square suggests that the higher-ups feel threatened by the new uprising among China's youth, which speaks to the movement's power.



The students' choice to meet the government on their knees says a lot about the way that this younger generation views the government. Kneeling before officials—the same officials who claim to espouse communist values, under which all people would be equal—demonstrates that the students recognize the government as a paternalistic authority figure. This, in turn, highlights the ways in which it is hypocritical for a government that seeks to establish equality to severely oppress its people.



The demonstrators pass, and Sparrow and Ai-ming return to the topic of studying in Canada. Sparrow tells Ai-ming that he and Ling don't want her to be so far away, but Ai-ming says that they could come with her. She reminds him of his own dream, which he told her when she was young: to go abroad, write his own **music**, and hear others play. According to Ai-ming, things are changing: the students' actions in response to Yaobang's death are evidence of this. These reforms, Ai-ming thinks, will give new opportunities to people like her father, who were, in her words, "unfairly treated." But Sparrow tells his daughter that he has chosen his life the way it is. They stand together in Tiananmen Square, where Ai-ming feels "confusingly large," even though "the architecture [is] intended to make a person feel insignificant."

It is almost as if Ai-ming has inherited her father's dreams: although he couldn't go and live abroad, she feels that she might have the opportunity to do so. Thien's choice to link Ai-ming's dreams with her father's illustrates the strength of their connection. What's more, Ai-ming's analysis of Tiananmen Square's architecture—that it seeks to make people feel small—suggests that her interest in the power of the individual remains. She cannot be subdued by the repressive architecture, and, conversely, feels that due to the protests' message she is finally able to express herself sincerely.



CHAPTER 4 (II)

One day, Yiwen asks Ai-ming if she wants to join her in going to another student protest. The demonstrations have been continuing ever since Yaobang's death. Ai-ming studies in the morning, but as soon as her parents leave for work, she grabs her bike and pedals off to find Yiwen at the protest. When she comes close to Tiananmen Square, the crowd is so thick that she thinks it was silly for her to imagine that she would be able to find Yiwen in such a dense demonstration.

The fact that there are so many people at the demonstrations serves to emphasize how powerful the student movement is. In contrast to the Red Guard movement of the 1960s, who sought to destroy individual opinion, this time students are demonstrating for their right to express their opinions and speak out against the government.



All around Ai-ming, people are shouting, protesting the way that the government and the media have labelled them a "mob" that seeks to destroy the rule of socialism in China. "We are not a mob, we are civilized members of society!" one declares. "The People love the People's strike!" The students declare. Ai-ming thinks to herself that the students aren't asking for "anything impossible [...] just room to move, to grow up and be free, and for the Party to criticize itself." Soon, Ai-ming sees a pink headband standing out in the crowd and she thinks she sees Yiwen in the crowd below. Before Ai-ming knows it, she is in the middle of the protest, by Yiwen's side. When Yiwen turns and sees her, she hugs Ai-ming, brushing her mouth against Ai-ming's hair. Ai-ming thinks to herself that because of Sparrow's political status, she has never had a real friend before.

Yiwen's choice to wear the color pink as a representation of her individuality invites a comparison between Yiwen's politics and the politics of the Red Guards. While both Yiwen and the Red Guards seek to create a better China through public demonstrations, Yiwen—and the students she is associated with—do so through peaceful demonstrations and make an effort to give space to voices of dissent and criticism. Rather than wanting people to criticize themselves, as the Red Guards wanted, the generation wants the Party itself to undergo self-criticism.



Meanwhile, Ling is riding the bus home from work. When the bus reaches the area near Tiananmen Square, it comes to a standstill—there are so many people in the streets that the vehicle can no longer move. Someone tells Ling that the student protesters have broken through 3,000 police. Ling arrives home and knocks on Ai-ming’s door: inside, she finds Sparrow writing **music**. He asks Ling what the students are asking for, and she responds that she thinks the students don’t know anymore. The **radio**, she says, has compared the students to Red Guards, but the students don’t agree. In fact, no one agrees with the comparison. Ling confides in Sparrow that she doesn’t know why their generation let the Party decide everything for them: their entire fates, where they live, where they work. Sparrow isn’t able to form a full response before Ai-ming bursts into the apartment.

Sparrow is angry at Ai-ming. “How can I protect you?” he yells. He says that the government is right—the student protesters are like the Red Guards. They think they have the right to try and change everything, in Sparrow’s eyes. He recalls how the Red Guards have taken everything from him—Zhuli, Da Shan, Flying Bear.

In the coming days, Sparrow is overwhelmed by the political climate—the protests have reached his workplace. He becomes unable to sleep at night. Sparrow takes to roaming the streets, using a Walkman cassette player that Ai-ming gave him to listen to **music** as he wanders. One evening, he walks into Beijing University and he sees the place covered with posters that students have written. He remembers the posters that covered the Conservatory in his youth—“We will carry the socialist revolution through to the end!”—and he compares them with those written by members of Ai-ming’s generation, like “Democracy takes time to achieve, it cannot be accomplished overnight.” A student protester sees Sparrow and, thinking the older man is a spy, demands that he leave. As Sparrow backs away, he trips over a poster that reads, “A society that speaks with only one voice is not a stable society.”

Kai has written to Sparrow, asking him to meet him in Hong Kong in the coming weeks. Sparrow responds that he will. He wonders if Kai can help his family achieve a better future—Kai, now living in Canada, might be able to sponsor Ai-ming, for instance, if she were to study there. Such a thing would change his life, Sparrow thinks; but then again, wasn’t society changing all around him? Beijing University students have boycotted classes for a month, and there are no signs of that changing soon.

Both Sparrow and Ai-ming are experiencing more full embodiments of their true identities. Ai-ming expresses herself through participating in the protests, while Sparrow expresses himself by returning to write music. Again, Thien parallels father and daughter’s experience, which highlights the strong link between them. Ling’s observation that the radio has compared the students to Red Guards suggests that the radio is trying to undermine the movement by comparing it to the violence of the past. Furthermore, Ling’s questioning of the Party’s policies suggests that the student movement is provoking such questions and criticisms across the whole population.



Here, Sparrow shows how traumatized he still is over the Cultural Revolution. Because he lost so much family in that moment, for him, a priority now is not allowing Ai-ming to express herself, but simply keeping her safe.



Here, readers learn that the students aren’t just advocating for freedom of expression, but also democracy. This shows how different they have become than their parents’ generation, that lived under an extremely repressive authoritarian regime. The poster that Sparrow trips over as he leaves is particularly significant: it highlights the importance of diversity in opinion, which is exactly the opposite message from what the Red Guards spread during the Cultural Revolution. Within Sparrow’s lifetime, youth politics have shifted from obsessive collectivism to prioritizing the individual.



Sparrow has significantly changed his opinion about Ai-ming going to Canada since she first brought it up to him. When she mentioned it, Sparrow was pessimistic, but he now seems hopeful and willing to entertain the real possibility of his daughter’s dream. This new optimism is likely an effect of the political climate, which introduces the possibility of positive change after many years of hardship.



Sparrow is composing **music** in Ai-ming's room when he hears on the **radio** that the students in Tiananmen Square have begun a hunger strike. The next day at work, no one at Sparrow's factory can focus—they hardly put together any radios. Many of his coworkers are joining an independent workers' union, completely unconnected with the government. Sparrow hasn't yet signed on. He's focused on his upcoming trip to Hong Kong, to see Kai—it's the first time in his life that he will travel outside of China. At the factory, a coworker tells Sparrow that he looks unwell and that he should go home, so Sparrow leaves and pedals around the city, worried that he is looking so old that people call him Grandfather when he is not yet 50.

Although Sparrow didn't mean to go to Tiananmen Square, he finds himself pedaling in the direction of the student protest. He enters the square where hundreds of students are lying on the ground, behind the Monument of the People's Heroes. He thinks to himself that "the hunger strikers [have] the brightest futures in the entire country"—Beijing University is the most prestigious institution of higher learning, and the students are destined for good jobs that will likely enable them to support their family members for the rest of their lives. As Sparrow thinks, a young man comes up to him and asks him to leave—for the security of the "hunger strike revolutionaries," only students are allowed in the square.

The next evening, Ai-ming comes home, crying. Sparrow, not knowing how to support her, gives her candy—he knows that she has been pretending to be a student and sleeping in Tiananmen Square this whole time. Ai-ming tells him that many students have lost consciousness due to the hunger strikes, that they are on IV drips. Some are even threatening to set themselves on fire. The government had planned for a festival in Tiananmen Square to commemorate the first visit from a Soviet government head since 1959, but the celebration had been cancelled. The next morning, Sparrow joins his fellow factory workers at a demonstration and he imagines what Zhuli, whom the Red Guards accused of so many things, would have thought of this moment. Ai-ming, he thinks to himself, is coming of age in a different China.

Thien skillfully juxtaposes Sparrows' colleagues' inability to produce radios—instruments that exist primarily for the spread of propaganda—with their obsessive listening to the radio covering the student demonstrations. Likely, they are unable to focus because they are fascinated with the students' courage and curious how the demonstrations will turn out. This suggests their interest in political change, which symbolically gets in the way of them doing their job of producing tools that the government uses to repress its people.



Sparrow increasingly does things that he doesn't "intend" to do, like go the student protests. This suggests that there is a deep part of his identity that—after years of being repressed first by the government and, once Sparrow internalized the repression, by Sparrow himself—is finally able to express itself again. By subconsciously going to Tiananmen Square, Sparrow demonstrates that there is a large part of him that agrees with the protesters and is interested in their work.



In this moment, it becomes clear that the student demonstrations are directly affecting government proceedings, which speaks to the movement's power. The celebration of the Soviets' visit would likely be an occasion for the government to produce widespread propaganda about China's progress and ability to collaborate with other major world powers. But the students' freedom of expression prevents the government from executing its performance of progress, its performance of competence. This is one moment in which the truth is more powerful than performance or propaganda.



At home, Sparrow occupies himself writing **music**. He has finished a draft of a new composition: he's decided to call it *The Sun Shines Down on the People's Square*. He has written it not thinking of the contemporary Tiananmen Square of 1989, but rather of "the square courtyards of the laneway house, the sheets of Zhuli's music, the square record jackets he [has] burned." He is working on the piece one night when Ai-ming interrupts him to say she and Ling are going to help Yiwen bring blankets to the Square. She asks Sparrow if he would like to come along, and he agrees. When the family arrives on bikes at the square, only Ai-ming is allowed to enter, and Sparrow watches her run ahead and talk to Yiwen.

At that moment, an old man runs up to Ling and Sparrow and he announces that the new independent workers' union has called for all of the workers of the city to participate in a general strike. Ling whispers, "How do they dare? How do we dare?" Soon after, a student shouts that the General Secretary and Premier of the Party are going to arrive soon at the hunger strike. Ai-ming, crying, comes out of the crowd to be with her parents, and Ling leads them to a restaurant to eat. When they finish around three a.m., students are dragging speakers around to broadcast the results of their meeting with the Party heads.

The Party's spokesperson begins to speak into the microphone, and all over the city, the people listen. He begins his statement with an apology, saying that the criticisms the Party has received are justified. But he tells the students that it is foolish to continue on a hunger strike until they have "a satisfactory answer." He reminds them that they have long futures ahead of them—by risking their lives for a hunger strike, he says, they are acting irrationally, and "under irrational circumstances, it is hard to think clearly." The General Secretary proposes that the government will continue the dialogue if the students agree to end the hunger strike. When the broadcast ends, Ling is crying. Ai-ming asks Sparrow, "What does it mean?" When her parents don't respond, she says she wants to leave, and Sparrow leads his family back home, through the dark.

In this passage, it is obvious that although Sparrow isn't writing directly about Tiananmen Square, the students' courage in the resistance movement empowers him to expressing his own creativity again. The student demonstrations inspire him and given him strength to look into the ways in which his own family has suffered at the hands of the government. The student protests become a catalyst for Sparrow to process and commemorate through music his family's story.



The detail that the protests have move beyond the students and are reaching workers shows how deeply Chinese society has yearned for change—all it took were some students standing up to the government for almost everyone to get involved. The empowerment that this implies among the people of China suggests that they will no longer tolerate living under an authoritarian regime and need more independence and individual freedom.



The Party official's disappointing response to the students suggests that the Communist Party is not as radical or progressive as it claims to be. His answer implies that the government is slow and bureaucratic, unable or unwilling to implement quick, radical change. While in the past the government supported the Red Guards, it now undermines the authority of the student protesters. This suggest the Party's corruption—perhaps it was beneficial for them to support the Red Guards in a way that supporting these students may not be.



The next morning, Yiwen tells Ai-ming that the spokesperson who addressed the students the night before had been removed from office. There were protests in 151 Chinese cities, and the government was going to declare martial law. As she and Sparrow eat breakfast, Ai-ming tells him she will continue studying for the national entrance exams. Sparrow finally reveals to her that he plans to visit Kai that coming month and he even suggests that Kai might be able to sponsor Ai-ming to go study in Canada. When Sparrow leaves for the factory, though, Ai-ming pulls on one of Yiwen's dresses and she goes to the courtyard to gather Yiwen's dried clothes, along with a toothbrush and washcloth, into a bag. She jumps on her bicycle and leaves home.

Getting to Tiananmen Square is no easy task. As Ai-ming navigates through the city, she comes across areas so full of traffic that no one can pass through. Her bike gets a flat tire; desperate, she hops on the first bus that passes her. The army has arrived in the city, and all around Ai-ming, people of all ages are yelling at the soldiers, trying to get them to leave. She even sees "an ancient grandmother [who has] taken it upon herself to lie down in the road. 'Who are you retaking the streets from, eh?' she [says] hoarsely."

When Ai-ming gets to the square, she can't see Yiwen anywhere—it is only around 10 at night that Ai-ming finds her. The hunger strike was officially called off that afternoon, so Ai-ming takes Yiwen and two of her friends to a noodle stand. Unsure what to do now that the strike is over, the girls are desperate. One thinks that going back to university might be a trap; another feels that the students can't lose Tiananmen Square, which is their "headquarters." Ai-ming marvels at how the students are talking about fighting the army, using military terms.

At the next table, two girls sing a Cultural Revolution song. "All these songs," Yiwen says. "I thought they were real." Ai-ming responds that the songs are "just words," and one of Yiwen's friends responds, calmly, "But what else did we have?" Once the girls have finished eating, Ai-ming continues to think about the songs of the Cultural Revolution. She thinks about how once, "idealism had belonged to Chairman Mao [...] had their generation inherited it? How could a person know the difference between what [is] real and what [is] merely illusion, or see when a truth has transformed into its opposite?" After leaving the restaurant, Ai-ming and Yiwen go to sleep on the ground in front of the army trucks.

In firing the spokesperson, the government has officially established itself as being against the people rather than with them. Declaring martial law further clarifies that the government's priority is maintaining control over its people rather than serving them and listening to their needs. Still, Ai-ming's continued presence at the protests and support of Yiwen suggests that she, along with other members of her generation, do not plan to give up so easily on advocating for change.



Thien's choice to pit a grandmother against an army tank emphasizes the difference between the protester's pacifism—clearly, a grandmother isn't going to hurt anyone—and the government's violence. It also shows that the desire for independence and free expression has reached every generation.



Here, Thien characterizes Yiwen and her friends as courageous and empowered. They clearly neither fear nor respect the government's authority, and they feel that as citizens they have the right to express themselves and demand change. This shows that the power dynamic that was established during the Cultural Revolution between the government and the people is no longer as strong.



The students' choice to sing a Cultural Revolution song speaks to music as a motif throughout the story. While Ai-ming thinks that songs, "just words," aren't powerful, her friends disagree—music is the only thing they have. In this moment, the student's choice to use a Cultural Revolution song is interesting—while in the past, the Red Guards' songs were propaganda representing repression and violence, in this context, they instead speak to the need for the students to be able to freely express themselves and for the government to listen.



Meanwhile, Sparrow is biking home from the factory late at night. The streets are congested by the army—when Sparrow sees how many trucks there are, he almost falls off his bicycle. He smells bonfires and he remembers the time, years ago when on his way home from the secret meeting Kai invited him to, he saw a university professor being publicly humiliated in the streets, surrounded by bonfires. Now, it is morning by the time Sparrow gets home, and neither Ling nor Ai-ming are there. Sparrow drinks tea and turns on the **radio**, which isn't playing **music**; rather, the radio simply replays the announcement of martial law. Hearing this, Sparrow “regret[s] all of the radios he [has] ever built.”

Sparrow falls asleep and he wakes that afternoon to see Ai-ming looming over him. She announces that representatives from Sparrow's factory have come. When Sparrow meets his coworkers in the living room, they request that he join the independent union with them. The three of them set off on their bicycles to register as part of the union, where Sparrow “sign[s] his name below thousands of others.” Outside is Tiananmen Square, and Sparrow goes to observe the students. The area smells terrible and the students look completely destitute. Things get worse when a heavy rain breaks out, destroying the few protections the students have. Before Sparrow's coworkers come to get him, he sees a girl with a pink headband and he wonders if it is Yiwen.

Sparrow's new union is planning to form a barricade at the demonstration, and he is assigned to Muxidi Bridge, very close to home. Ling joins their neighbors in handing out snacks to the protesters. In the past week, Ling has thrown herself into her work at the **radio** station—rather than waiting for approval from higher-ups and the government, she and many of her colleagues have gone ahead and taken the students' side in radio broadcasting. Sparrow remembers the “sharp-eyed philosophy student” Ling was when they met and he thinks to himself that she “[has] been biding her time and here she [is] now, as if she [has] never been away.” Indeed, Sparrow wonders how many people all across the city have now decided to shed the many layers of disguise they had habitually worn in all of the years since the Cultural Revolution.

Just as Sparrow is beginning to battle sleep, the People's Liberation Army begins to retreat. The soldiers, laughing and crying, wave as they back out of the neighborhood. That day, Ai-ming comes home and she offers to cook for her family. In response to the army leaving, the students have planned a full retreat from Tiananmen Square. But the celebration is short-lived—later that same night, the **radio** announces that the students have changed their minds and they will stay in the square until the Party conference on June 20, the same day Sparrow plans to visit Kai in Hong Kong.

In this moment, Thien most clearly establishes the relationships between radio and propaganda. Her choice to juxtapose the repetition of martial law with playing music underscores the tension between free, creative expression and propaganda. Sparrow's expression of regret at having built radios has two meanings: first, that he has facilitated the government's repression and spread of propaganda, and second, that he dedicated his life to making radios rather than playing music, which for him represents freely expressing himself.



Again in this moment Thien draws readers' attention to the sheer number of people who are involved in resisting the government—the fact that Sparrow signs below thousands of names is exemplary. Additionally, the fact that Sparrow associates Yiwen with her pink headband further emphasizes how Yiwen has been able to distinguish herself and carve out an individual identity—represented by the color pink—in a society that previously has sought to erase all differences among people, to squash individuality.



Again, Thien emphasizes how extensive the protests have become. Citizens are involved in all forms, from preventing the military from entering the city to people like Ling, who show their support by passing out snacks. At Ling's workplace, the radio station itself where so much propaganda is produced, the people have shown great courage in respecting their own moral authority and taking the students' side over the government propaganda. This is a direct victory of freedom of speech and expression over propaganda.



The fact that the soldiers are laughing and crying as they retreat suggests that some of them agree with the student movement and would have been regretful at having to use force to repress it. This underscores how widespread dissatisfaction with the government is among the people. The students show courage in choosing to continue their protest until all of their needs are met.



CHAPTER 3 (II)

In Shanghai in 2016, Li-ling receives an unexpected call from Tofu Liu. His niece has connected him with someone he thinks Li-ling should meet: Yiwen, an old friend of Ai-ming's. Since the protests, Yiwen has gone to study electrical engineering at Tokyo University, gotten married and divorced, and had a daughter, now in her teens. Li-ling asks about Ai-ming and her mother, and Yiwen tells her that Ling died in 1996. She says that Ai-ming returned in 1996 for her mother's funeral and that she had neither a U.S. visa nor Chinese permanent residency. Ai-ming, Yiwen says, was unwell during that time—her mother's death took a toll on her. In 1997, Ai-ming sent Yiwen a letter saying she was going to Western China and asking Yiwen if she would go with her—Yiwen, living in Tokyo, declined.

Li-ling asks Yiwen whether Ling ever mentioned that Ai-ming had gone to live with her and her mother in Canada. Seemingly surprised that she had asked, Yiwen responds that "it was just the way life was back then [...] people lost one another. You could be sent five thousand kilometers away, with no hope of coming back. Everyone had so many people like this in their lives, people sent away."

When Yiwen leaves, Li-ling begins to think of Kai again. She feels that when her father left, she was too young to understand any of the regrets that led him to take his own life. Her mother has told her that he was addicted to pills and alcohol and he was severely depressed. Li-ling wonders if Kai felt that what happened to Sparrow was his fault—he had loved Sparrow for his whole life. Li-ling reflects that although she has struggled to forgive her father for her entire life, now that she's older, "[she] wish[es] most of all that he had been able to find a way to forgive himself." Thinking of **The Book of Records**, Li-ling imagines that if her father were alive, she would tell him "to have faith that, one day, someone else will keep the record."

In this moment, Thien highlights the strength of family connections and community networks. Clearly, Tofu Liu cared a lot about Zhuli when he knew her—so much that he is willing to do the work to connect Ai-ming, whom he has just met, with Yiwen, who knows his niece. The fact that people are able to maintain such strong bonds and commitment to one another shows how dedicated they are to preserving community, and how no matter what efforts the government seeks to divide them, people find ways of staying connected.



Yiwen speaks to the trauma of separation and isolation that many people experienced living under the repressive government of the 1980s. What Li-ling sees as a tragic separation, due to being raised in the less oppressive Canada, Yiwen sees as a normal consequence of living under a government that controls so many aspects of its people's lives.



Here, Li-ling finally finds forgiveness for her father. She sets him free by acknowledging that his ability to forgive himself is more important than her ability to forgive him. This idea harkens back to one of Zhuli's last thoughts, that all of the Red Guards would individually have to reckon with the atrocities that they committed as a collective. Additionally, Li-ling seems to think that Kai was burdened by having to carry so many family secrets and tragedies. Clearly, she has stepped into the role of keeping the record, which is also a way of setting him free.



CHAPTER 2 (II)

In 1989 Shanghai, after the students have declared they will not retreat from Tiananmen Square, Sparrow is more productive than he has been in weeks at the factory—he feels that **music** newly infuses everything he does. In the outside world, Hong Kong entrepreneurs have sent tents and fresh supplies to the students in the Square. There are rumors that the People’s Liberation Army is planning a coup. When Sparrow gets home, he calls Big Mother Knife, who tells him that although she hasn’t joined the protests, she believes in the students’ cause. She also has news for him: Wen the Dreamer and Swirl have sent her a letter, and they are coming home. The government’s convictions against Wen have been lifted, and Sparrow can expect them at his house in the winter. Big Mother Knife tells him that they know everything—they know that Zhuli is dead.

The next day, having stayed late at Tiananmen Square with Yiwen the night before, Ai-ming sleeps until noon. She plans to go to the Square that night but not to stay too long—she wants to come home and get a good night’s rest. As Sparrow sleeps through the afternoon, the **radio** broadcasts over and over, “All Beijing citizens must be on high alert! Please stay off the streets and away from Tiananmen Square! All workers should remain at their posts and all citizens should stay at home to safeguard their lives!” Neither he nor Ai-ming believes that the army will re-enter the city.

Suddenly, there is a knock on the door, and Ai-ming answers it to a harried woman with a stain of “dried red mud” on her clothing. She is one of Sparrow’s coworkers and she begs him for help. Two of their coworkers have been hit by the army, she says, and she needs to bring them to Sparrow’s apartment. Sparrow instructs Ai-ming to stay with Ling and leaves with his colleague. Ling, holding Sparrow’s new composition, *The Sun Shines on the People’s Square*, asks Ai-ming, “Why did he go with her [...] Doesn’t he know what’s happening out there? Does he really believe that he can carry on as if he is invisible?”

Later that night, Ai-ming is trying to distract herself by studying for the entrance exams when Yiwen knocks on her window. Crying, she begs Ai-ming to come outside, and Ai-ming does. As they run out the courtyard, Ai-ming remembers that she forgot to close the window. When she goes back to shut it, she sees Ling hovering in the doorway. “Ai-ming, come back,” her mother says.

Sparrow shows how deeply he has re-embraced himself in being so energized by playing music. Hong Kong’s intervention in the protests shows readers that the student demonstrations have drawn international attention—although the rumor that the army is planning a coup suggests that the Chinese government might not think that international disapproval matters much. Additionally, the fact that Wen the Dreamer and Swirl are able to come back to China after being away for so long shows that the government is changing in this period, even if it is not changing as much or as quickly as the students would like.



Here, the alarming warnings broadcasted on the radio suggest that the army does plan to re-enter the city. Sparrow and Ai-ming are likely so enthused by the people’s former victory over the army that they don’t give the warnings much importance. Still, the messages on the radio show that the government plans to continue to repress the people’s free expression, through violence if necessary.



The “dried red mud” on the woman’s hair is clearly blood, which is the first sign that violence is occurring in the city. What’s more, it is symbolic that Ling is holding on to Sparrow’s composition—this is his record, the story he has chosen to tell of his life, and the way that he has been able to express his identity after so many years of repression. This is what will be left of him when he dies.



Ai-ming demonstrates her loyalty to Yiwen by leaving the house even though, by that point, she knows that there is violence in the street. She also shows her commitment to advocating for what’s right, even if it means sacrificing her own life. In this way, she mirrors Zhuli, who died for her commitment to freedom of expression.



Outside, Ai-ming cannot recognize the streets of Beijing as her own: bricks and debris are everywhere, and the smoke from “at least a dozen fires” clouds the air. Yiwen yells to her that the army is killing people all over the city—including in the neighborhood where Sparrow went with the coworker who came to the door.

Sparrow, with his coworker, is surrounded by the army. He feels that there are more soldiers and more people on the streets with every passing moment. One of their other coworkers has been hit with a bullet, and they go to lift him out of the rubble. Sparrow, weak, worries that he will bring them all down if he falls. He and his coworkers place the injured man on a flatbed tricycle, and Sparrow feels “an anger that had seemed long gone, or had never existed in him before.”

Near home now, Sparrow hears on the loudspeaker the **radio** repeating, over and over, “Go home, Go home.” As he approaches his own neighborhood, he begins to feel, incongruously, safe. He sees a young couple with a baby stranded beneath an awning. The man tells the woman they need to go home, but the woman refuses, saying, “We’re trapped, they’re shooting there.” Across the street, Sparrow sees a teenager pointing a camera, taking pictures. The soldiers turn and shoot him, one coming forward to bayonet him in the stomach. Sparrow runs toward the teenager to try to help him, trying to stop the blood streaming from the teenager’s wounds. Minutes later, Sparrow lifts the boy’s body onto a cart.

Again, Sparrow sees the stranded young couple. The woman senses an opportune moment and darts into an alleyway; the man, frozen with fear, stays in place. Sparrow suddenly begins to run toward the soldiers. He remembers Big Mother Knife saying to him, “Never forget: if you sing a beautiful song, if you faithfully remember all of the words, the People will never abandon the musician.” He thinks of Zhuli, of carrying her body home from the Conservatory; he thinks of Kai and the letter Sparrow sent just weeks earlier, saying he would come to Hong Kong. He thinks of Ling and Ai-ming, all the while running toward the soldiers.

Ai-ming is in Tiananmen Square with Yiwen—they, along with hundreds of other students, slept in the Square all night. Two professors who participated in the hunger strike with the students run back and forth between their tent and the army, trying to negotiate a peaceful retreat. Every so often, the students are asked to vote whether they will leave or stay. While Ai-ming wants to leave while they still can, Yiwen wants to stay. “Other people died for us!” she shouts, not wanting her fellow protesters’ lives to have been sacrificed in vain.

Here, the knowledge that the army is shooting in the part of the city where Sparrow is gives Ai-ming a taste of the fear that Sparrow and his family lived with during the Cultural Revolution. She now sees firsthand how political violence can separate families.



Sparrow’s anger rising up can be seen as the parts of him that have been repressed for so long finally coming to the surface. This violence likely triggers painful and infuriating memories of the violence his own family experienced during the Cultural Revolution, that led to so much loss and suffering.



Here, the soldiers’ decision to shoot the teenager with the camera stems from their desire to hide what is really happening from the public eye. This suggests that their operations are covert, and that it is unlikely the government will admit to any violence once this moment is over. The teenager, on the other hand, represents freedom of press, in some ways; as a citizen, he should have the right to document what is happening all around him. Instead, due to the government’s repression, he dies for this.



Sparrow, like Zhuli, gives up his life for what he believes in. It’s interesting that he associates music with this moment, in which he attacks the soldiers in protest of their violence and oppression. Perhaps music is a stand-in for the expression of anything that is true or meaningful. Indeed, in attacking the soldiers, Sparrow demonstrates his commitment to what he believes, which is that the soldiers and the government they serve are wrong and oppressive.



In this moment, the student demonstrations are chaos. They are faced with a difficult decision: they must choose either their lives or advocating for what they believe in until the very end. This is the exact choice that Zhuli was faced with at the end of her life. Both options result in the students’ inability to fully live: either they die, or they give up a key part of their identity and belief system.



Slowly, the soldiers close in on the students, forcing them into a tight funnel. Some start screaming. Others try to fight back, but still, they are being forced forward and out of the Square. As they leave, the leaders begin singing the *Internationale*: “Arise, slaves, arise! / Do not say that we have nothing, / We shall be the masters of the world!” Ai-ming and Yiwen break off from the crowd to make their way home, avoiding gunfire when they hear it.

Here, the students’ choice to sing the Internationale clearly shows that they believe the government is hypocritical. The student demonstrations were in line with communist values, which stress the importance of the government responding to the people’s needs. Instead, however, the government has chosen to repress the voices of the people.



CHAPTER 1 (II)

In the weeks following the protests, Ai-ming and Ling search for Sparrow in all of the hospitals of the city, but when they don’t find him after three weeks, Ai-ming decides not to pretend anymore. Ling continues looking for Sparrow, and one day while she’s gone to another hospital, Yiwen knocks on Ai-ming’s door. She says someone is calling for her father. On the phone is Jiang Kai, who says he needs to speak with Sparrow urgently. Ai-ming says that she doesn’t know where her father is, and Kai tries to insist on helping. But Ai-ming, overcome with grief, hangs up.

Sparrow’s death is yet another tragedy in his family, which lost so many members to political violence and its aftermath. Kai, who has managed to survive all this time by being on the side of the government, represents what may have happened to Sparrow had he chosen to sacrifice his values and be complicit with the authoritarian regime. Kai’s guilt over choosing this path likely informs his desire to help Sparrow leave the country.



When Yiwen and Ai-ming get back to Ai-ming’s apartment, there are strange people there: a man and a woman who, although they behave with authority, wear no uniforms. They ask for Sparrow’s residency permit and factory badge. When they see Sparrow’s composition on his desk, the man begins to tear it up “almost without thinking [...] as if he [is] just folding laundry or doing the dishes.” Ai-ming yells for help, and Yiwen appears, yelling at the strangers to leave. With Yiwen’s help, Ai-ming is able to piece together nine pieces of her father’s composition.

The people who arrive in the apartment are more similar to the Red Guards than the student demonstrations ever were. Their habitual violence—almost a reflex—shows how normalized violence against the people has become. Yiwen and Ai-ming’s attempts to restore the composition the thugs destroyed shows their commitment to preserving Sparrow’s legacy, his story, and by extension the family history that inspired the composition.



That night, Ling sits over Ai-ming as she sleeps. At Ling’s workplace, the **radio** station, several of her colleagues have been forced to write denunciations of the student movement. Ling knows that she herself will soon give in. She remembers what she saw when she went to the hospitals the day after the massacre—the nurses begging her to give blood and the bodies stacked up outside the hospital, with no room for them inside. All she wants to do is lie down next to her daughter and forget everything she experienced in those past weeks.

Ling’s horrifying memories of the hospitals show how exaggerated the army’s repression of Beijing was. To leave so many dead and wounded shows overuse of violence in repressing the movement. What’s more, Ling’s resignation—knowing that she will soon renounce what she believes in only to protect herself and her family—highlights the governments’ repression of freedom of speech and her hopelessness in fighting against it.



The next morning, the new director of the **radio** station summons Ling into his office. He tells her that Sparrow's body had been found on June 4 and that he had already been cremated. He tells her that Sparrow died of a stroke. Ling asks where Sparrow supposedly had this stroke, and the director replies, "at home," sliding a piece of paper across the desk for her to sign. He tells her that he knows Ai-ming is going to take the entrance exam in the following month—she needs to pass political background checks, and he asks Ling to tell him everything she knows about Sparrow's involvement with people who "harbor resentment towards the Party." After a moment of silence, Ling says, "He's already dead [...] What more do you want from him? I gave my life to the Party [...] What more do you want from me?"

When Ling looks up to meet the director's eyes, he looks "genuinely ashamed." As Ling pedals home, she thinks to herself that things could still be different—she and Sparrow had missed the opportunity, but Ai-ming could have a better life. Still, she thinks that "for her daughter behind this mountain was another mountain, behind this sea, another sea."

CODA

In Li-ling's mind, Ai-ming's story could end any number of ways. She wonders if Ai-ming became involved in something she couldn't share with anyone, if she got lost "in the maze of detention centers" in the United States. Still, sometimes Li-ling imagines that in Vancouver, she and Ai-ming will meet in the apartment where her parents live, by chance.

In Shanghai in 2016, Tofu Liu performs Sparrow's sonata, *The Sun Shines on the People's Square*. There are 30 people in the room, including Li-ling; Yiwen and her daughter; and Ai-ming's great aunt, the Old Cat. Li-ling imagines that Sparrow, Kai, and Zhuli are also present. Hearing the **music** dedicated to her father, Li-ling thinks, "Ai-ming [...] you and I are still here."

Here, the new director of the radio station shows great insensitivity in the way he treats Ling's loss. Rather than expressing condolences, he questions her about her deceased husband's political activity. This bleakly suggests that the government values its citizens political loyalty far more than it values their lives, which is an inherently dehumanizing posture to adopt towards the population. What's more, his suggestion that association with political demonstration could harm Ai-ming's chances at entering college reflect the unfair class systems that punish political dissent and foster inequality.



Ling has managed to provoke an emotional response in the director, getting him to see her as an individual rather than seeing her and her family only through the lens of politics. The fact that Ling is optimistic about Ai-ming's future suggests that she hasn't completely lost hope even with the disappointing results of the demonstrations.



Li-ling's continued commitment to looking for Ai-ming, even after so long a separation, shows the strength of their bond. In spite of the many political barriers to their reunion—from U.S. immigration policy to Chinese repression—Li-ling has faith that she will again be connected with her beloved friend.



This is a crucial moment in the story that highlights the importance of preserving family stories—and people's ability to do so, even under a government that tries to repress individual expression and erase stories of dissent, creative expression, and freedom of speech. Sparrow's experience lives on through the composition he leaves behind, and will continue to live on in the minds of all who hear it.



In 1990, in China's far west, Ai-ming is with Swirl and Wen the Dreamer. They have been travelling together for 2,500 kilometers, and as they go, Swirl and Wen tell Ai-ming the stories of their family: about Zhuli, Lady Dostoevsky, and Big Mother Knife. Ai-ming often cries, even when the story is not a sad one. If they are able to cross the Chinese western border, they will send Ai-ming West, to Canada. When they arrive at the Kyrgyzstan border, Ai-ming meets an elderly woman who goes with her to Istanbul. From there, she goes to the Canada.

In 2016, Li-ling and Yiwen leave copies of **The Book of Records** online and in bookshops in Beijing, Shanghai, Dunhuang, and Hong Kong. They hope that one day, Ai-ming will find the book and she will know how to contact them. She imagines Ai-ming picking up her copy of *The Book of Records* and reading the first lines. *"Tomorrow begins from another dawn, when we will be fast asleep. Remember what I say: not everything will pass."*

Wen the Dreamer and Swirl have lived most of their lives completely off the government's radar which, while it has isolated them from their families, also seems to be a place of greater freedom. Their dedication to telling their family stories shows how strongly connected they are to their loved ones, even if they can't see them often. It's likely that this is where Ai-ming learns of many of the stories she later shares with Li-ling.



In this final moment in the story, Yiwen and Li-ling perpetuate her family's tradition of maintain connections to one another through storytelling even under repressive circumstances. The final quote, in saying that "not everything will pass" suggests that family histories will remain in the memories of generations to come.





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