



Do Not Say We Have Nothing (Thien)

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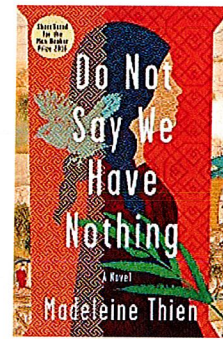
Do Not Say We Have Nothing

Madeleine Thien, 2016

W.W. Norton & Company

480 pp.

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Summary

Winner, 2016 Giller Prize

Winner, 2016 Governor General's Literary Award

Shortlisted, 2016 Man Booker Prize

Master storyteller Madeleine Thien takes us inside an extended family in China, showing us the lives of two successive generations—those who lived through Mao's Cultural Revolution and their children, who became the students protesting in Tiananmen Square.

At the center of this epic story are two young women, Marie and Ai-Ming. Through their relationship Marie strives to piece together the tale of her fractured family in present-day Vancouver, seeking answers in the fragile layers of their collective story.

Her quest will unveil how Kai, her enigmatic father, a talented pianist, and Ai-Ming's father, the shy and brilliant composer, Sparrow, along with the violin prodigy Zhuli were forced to reimagine their artistic and private selves during China's political campaigns and how their fates reverberate through the years with lasting consequences.

With maturity and sophistication, humor and beauty, Thien has crafted a novel that is at once intimate and grandly political, rooted in the details of life inside China yet transcendent in its universality. *(From the publisher.)*

Author Bio

- Birth—1974
- Where—Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
- Education—Simon Fraser University; University of British Columbia
- Awards—Giller Prize; Governor General's Literary Award
- Currently—lives in Montreal, Quebec

Book Reviews

[A] beautiful, sorrowful work. The book impresses in many senses: It stamps the memory with an afterimage; it successfully explores larger ideas about politics and art (the mind is never still while reading it); it has the satisfying, epic sweep of a 19th-century Russian novel, spanning three generations and lapping up against the shores of two continents...The background of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* pulses with music. Ms. Thien has that rare, instinctive sense of what it's like for a person's brain to be a hostage to its inner score—the call inside these characters' heads is always louder than the call of the outside world, most fatally that of the Communist Party—and her observations about Bach and Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Debussy are some of the book's sweetest pleasures, as are her ruthless critiques of musicians.

Jennifer Senior - New York Times

A powerfully expansive novel...Thien writes with the mastery of a conductor who is as in command of the symphony's tempo as she is attuned to the nuances of each individual instrument.

Jiayang Fan - New York Times Book Review

[A] graceful, intricate novel whose humanity threads through it like a stirring melodic line.

Sam Sacks - Wall Street Journal

A moving and extraordinary evocation of the 20th-century tragedy of China, and deserves to cement Thien's reputation as an important and compelling writer.

Guardian (UK)

Extraordinary...It recalls the panoramic scale and domestic minutiae of the great 19th-century Russian writers...A highly suspenseful drama...as courageous and far-reaching as principled resistance itself.

Financial Times (UK)

A magnificent epic of Chinese history, richly detailed and beautifully written.

London Times

A deeply profound and moving tale where music, mathematics and family history are beautifully woven together in a poetic story...Full of wisdom and complexity, comedy and beauty, Thien has delivered a novel that is both hugely political and severe, but at the same time delicate and intimate, rooted in the tumultuous history of China.

Herald (UK)

Filled with intrigue, shifting loyalties, broken families, and unbroken resistance, this novel is beautifully poetic and as carefully constructed as the Bach sonatas that make frequent appearance in the text. Thien's reach—though epic [makes]...a lovely fugue of a book.

Publishers Weekly

[An] ambitious saga explores the upheavals in Chinese politics from 1949 to the present through several generations of friends, family, and lovers whose intersecting destinies are upturned by the sweep of events.... Mythic yet realistic, panoramic yet intimate...and deeply haunting.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- [How to Discuss a Book](#) (helpful discussion tips)
- [Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction](#)
- [Read-Think-Talk](#) (a guided reading chart)

(We'll add specific questions if and when they're made available by the publisher.)

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DO NOT SAY WE HAVE NOTHING

Madeleine Thien

READING GROUP GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the author chose this particular structure of alternating past and present, or of stories opening through doorways into other stories? What does the counterpoint structure imply about time's relationships with music and history?
2. Ai-Ming explains to Marie that during the protests in Tiananmen Square, Ai-Ming had "understood, for the first time, what it felt like to look at her country through her own eyes and her own history, to come awake alongside millions of others." Why wasn't this possible before?
3. Explore the ideas of patriotism, complicity, and subversion in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. How do the characters relate to the Communist political regime? In what ways do they voice their fealty to the state, through sound or silence, and in what ways do they subvert the regime?
4. The characters in the novel have deep relationships to music. How does their appreciation of music relate to idealism and revolution? How does the state's treatment of music change throughout the novel?
5. Tiananmen Square is referred to as the "zero point." What does this mean? How does the mathematical concept of zero, an idea on which other numbers depend, manifest itself in the general novel? (292, 297, 463) Marie observes that "dividing by zero equals infinity" and that "a small thing never entirely disappears." Is silence a form of nothingness or does it contain contradictory possibilities?

6. At the conservatory, Sparrow views Zhuli's and Kai's ambitions with concern. Why? How is their conception of freedom and will different from his?
7. How would you characterize the relationships between Sparrow, Kai, and Zhuli? Do you think Zhuli was in love with Kai? How did Sparrow and Kai think of each other? How might their relationships have evolved if they'd been allowed other kinds of freedom?
8. Characters like Ba Lute and the president of the conservatory, He Luting, go from being hailed as Communist heroes and influential figures to being denounced as traitors. What forces are really at play? How do the Maoist slogans and practices, and ideas of goodness and violence, contradict themselves in the story?
9. Comrade Glass Eye tells Sparrow, "I wonder which story [Wen the Dreamer] wanted you to hear. You know how it is: pull one thread, and the whole curtain unravels." How is this remark true for the stories in the novel? What stories still remain untold? What questions are left unanswered?
10. Jiang Kai suggests that the people from his village are part of a pattern that recurs, generation after generation. How does this cyclical nature manifest itself in the novel and in the generations, revolutions, and desires it explores? How might this be related to the structure of Bach and the recurring motifs of the Goldberg Variations?
11. Examine the methods of storytelling. What is the purpose and significance of the Book of Records for the characters in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*? How does story, in its different forms of music, mathematics, language, and history, relate to the idea of a story that remains unfinished, partial, fragmented, unheard, or ongoing?
12. What do you think happens to Ai-Ming? Does Marie think she will ever find her? What do you think?

Madeleine Thien

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About this Person

Born: 1974 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Nationality: Canadian

Occupation: Writer

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It seems like a sure thing that *Certainty*, Madeleine Thien's eagerly anticipated first novel, will become an international bestseller. By the time the book appeared in Canadian bookstores in April 2006, Thien's publisher had already sold foreign rights in eight countries ranging from the United Kingdom and the United States to Italy, Israel and Serbia. "I'm kind of overwhelmed," Thien told Paul Gessell of the *Ottawa Citizen*.

When Thien submitted the manuscript of *Certainty* to her publisher, it had been five years since her literary debut. *Simple Recipes*, a collection of short stories published in 2001, had announced the arrival of a new voice in Canadian literature. Critics raved about Thien's finely crafted stories and marvelled at the polish the young author had brought to them --- and *Simple Recipes* won several awards and prizes.

Thien was born in Vancouver in 1974, the same year that her parents immigrated to Canada. "My mother is from Hong Kong," she told Gessell. "My father is from Malaysia. They met in Australia." Thien and her older brother and sister were raised in the polyglot world of Vancouver, where her father worked as a realtor and her mother as a purchasing executive.

As is the case with many immigrant families, the Thiens were, to some degree, haunted by their past, but determined to carve out new lives in their adopted homeland. Every week, Thien's mother took her to the public library where the youngster fell under the spell of the written word. "We moved a lot, and I was shy, so books became my refuge," Thien told Alec Scott of CBC Arts & Entertainment. During another interview, she told Ian McGillis of the *Montreal Review of Books*: "I loved *Harriet the Spy*, and a lot of Ursula K. LeGuin."

Thien's first forays into the arts were in the world of dance, as a ballerina. She was nine years old when she performed in *The Nutcracker* with the National Ballet of Canada. After graduating from high school, she enrolled at Simon Fraser University. There on a scholarship, she majored in dance and studied English literature. "I was in dance just because I had been doing it my whole life, not because I was passionate about it," she told Scott.

Thien dropped dance midway through her program. Switching to the University of British Columbia, she completed her undergraduate degree in English literature. Then she set her sights on admission to UBC's post-graduate creative writing program. Just getting in proved to be a challenge.

With no trace of irony, novelist Keith Maillard, one of her teachers at UBC told the *Canadian Press*: "Madeleine is something special. She has a really deft touch with a story." That didn't stop the program from twice rejecting her application.

"I'd never taken a writing program," Thien told the *Windsor Star* in 2006. "I didn't know any writers. I didn't even know what I was aiming for. The idea of submitting a portfolio of work with finished stories seemed so crazy, because I thought that's what you would learn in the program."

UBC's creative writing program is highly selective, admitting as few as 15 applicants from a field of 100 in any given year. Thien took the rejections in stride and patiently re-applied. "I had a lot of faith for some reason that it would eventually work itself out," she told *Canadian Press*. "I didn't mind being rejected once or twice because it seemed a normal part of the path toward what I wanted to do."

Once in the UBC program, students find themselves immersed in writing. "They don't do anything for two years except eat, breathe and sleep writing," Maillard told *Canadian Press*. Looking back on the experience, Thien said, "You come every week and write and read and discuss writing, and you do this for two years and it's really intense. Nobody tells you what to do, but you're learning. Maybe the only thing it does in the end is increase the pace at which you learn how to do technical things."

The program demands that students work in at least three different genres. "I was a terrible stage playwright," Thien continued. "I really enjoyed writing poetry, but I don't think that I'm a poet, and when I worked in non-fiction, I realized I wanted to stray beyond the bounds of fact. I wanted to fictionalize everything." And her background in dance exerted its own influence over her development as a writer. "There's so much expression through the body that you have to telegraph what's going on, but as sparsely as you can," Thien told *Maclean's*. "A lot of people say my writing's like that."

The stories that Thien was circulating to Canadian literary magazines such as *The Fiddlehead* drew welcome attention. In 1998, "Simple Recipes" won the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop Emerging Writer Award for Fiction. "Simple Recipes" is a story about a young girl's love and respect for the simple ritual by which her father prepares rice. In the story, the girl describes the preparation minutely, detailing how to measure the water "by resting the tip of your index finger on the surface of the rice. The water should reach the bend of your first knuckle." She relates the many hours she spends in the kitchen with her father, admiring the mastery of "the man of tricks, who sat for an hour mining a watermelon with a circular spoon, who carved the rind into a castle." But at the dinner table, her brother rejects the lovingly prepared meal, provoking her father's wrath. In minute detail again, the girl describes her father's caning of the boy with a bamboo rod.

In 1998, "Simple Recipes" was also shortlisted for the Journey Prize and included in *The Journey Prize Anthology*. This brought Thien's writing to the attention of Ellen Seligman, vice-president of McClelland & Stewart and its fiction publisher. Much impressed with the promise of Thien's work, Seligman contracted her to a two-book deal while the young author was still at university.

In 1999, Thien revealed another hint of what was to come in a piece she wrote for the *Vancouver Sun* on the annual Illuminares evening lantern procession at Vancouver's Trout Lake: "My first lanterns came from Chinatown, red tissue paper spheres with long silk tassels. When I was a child they appeared during the Mid-Autumn Festival, bobbing in doorways and awnings, shaped like carp or butterflies or long accordions, harbingers of good fortune. Years later, I stood in the grass at Trout Lake clutching my homemade box lantern, wide-eyed. All the lanterns of my childhood had bloomed and multiplied, floated out of the alleyways and storefronts of Chinatown and into the pitch-black night sky over Victoria Drive."

McClelland & Stewart published *Simple Recipes*, a collection of seven of Thien's stories, in 2001. "It's not light reading," James Macgowan observed in the *Ottawa Citizen*. "It's heavy, family stuff with much pain and angst. Seven stories tightly coiled with emotion, ready to spring out at you from the page. All coming from the pen of a 26-year-old."

Not surprisingly, Thien drew her inspiration from the world she had grown up in. "In Vancouver," she told Gessell, "I wanted to write short stories first because it seemed to me there were so many things going on inside each of these households and families that were so mysterious to the outsider. There really was that façade of house where you can't see past the surface. You really want to get inside."

Thien's stories of families in crisis, then, are not autobiographical. "I think there were a few very specific childhood memories that stayed with me for a long time and a lot of it just got rewoven into these stories," she told Macgowan. "The stories are even interesting for me to read because even I'm surprised sometimes to see where things ended up and how they were transformed."

In "Alchemy," a coming-of-age story, the narrator, Miriam, tells of her sexual awakening and how it led to the loss of her friendship with her best friend, Paula. Intertwined with Miriam's story, is a disturbing account of the abuse that Paula has suffered.

In "A Map of the City," the last story in the collection, a family of three is slowly disintegrating. Here, maps replace recipes as metaphors for the superficiality that masks the undercurrents that threaten family life. The father, having suffered several business failures, believes that he does not fit in B.C. Caught between nostalgia for the place of his birth and his disappointment at his life in his adopted homeland, he returns to Indonesia. Thien's own father returned to Malaysia in 1990 but, like the father in the story, returned to his family.

Novice writers can only dream of the sort of praise sparked by the collection. "This is surely the debut of a splendid writer. I am astonished by the clarity and ease of the writing, and a kind of emotional purity," wrote Alice Munro. In a review for the *New York Times*, Janice P. Nimura wrote: "*Simple Recipes* introduces a writer of precocious poise, but Thien is working with a limited number of ingredients. Her next effort, worth waiting for, will prove whether she has range as well as depth."

But readers were going to have to wait for that proof. In 2001, Vancouver's Whitecap Books published Thien's next book, *The Chinese Violin*, a children's book based on the true story of Lin Lin, an eight-year-old who immigrated to Canada from China with her father. Illustrator Joe Chang had originally brought the project to life as a silent, animated short for the National Film Board of Canada. Determined to give the story a second life as a children's book, he sought out Thien to provide the text to accompany his illustrations.

In Canada, Lin Lin's father plays his violin to comfort his daughter. One night, while walking home, he is mugged and his violin is broken. While Lin Lin strives to learn English at school and dreams of acceptance by her classmates, her father toils as a dishwasher. When he surprises her with the gift of a new violin, the instrument becomes her voice. "It didn't matter that she was shy when she spoke," wrote Thien. "They loved the sound of her music."

With two books under her belt, Thien received her Master of Fine Arts degree from UBC in 2001. She had already started her next project, and it would take her the next five years to complete it. During that time, life would take her far from British Columbia.

Thien had fallen in love with Willem Atsma, a biomechanical engineer who had been born and raised in Friesland, a province in the Netherlands, and the couple planned to spend the winter there. "The idea was that he would finish his Ph.D. and we'd move to Paris," Thien told the *Windsor Star* in the spring of 2006. "We thought we'd be done in three months. That was in 2002."

The couple was married in 2004 and, shortly afterward, moved to Quebec City, where Atsma had landed a job researching human motor control for a company that specialized in developing prosthetics.

Living in Quebec was a new experience, but the couple's year and a half in the Netherlands had prepared Thien for the transition. "Quebec City really feels like a cross between Europe and Canada,"

she told McGillis. "It's a good place for an English writer. Maybe it depends on the person, but I enjoy standing apart a bit. And it's a big enough city that there's always something to do." She describes her French as functional. "I hope to be bilingual by the time we have to leave," she said.

In the Netherlands, and then in Quebec, Thien continued to work on her next book --- her first novel. Thien had grown up hearing stories about her grandfather and the events surrounding his death in 1945. "My grandfather was murdered after the war was over but before the town of Sandakan [in British North Borneo, now the province of Sabah, eastern Malaysia] was liberated by Allied soldiers," Thien told Kevin Chong of the *Vancouver Sun*. "I don't think anyone knows exactly how he died. I don't know if his body was ever found. My father once told me that all he remembers is his own father being led away by Japanese soldiers and then never returning."

In 2000, Thien spent several months backpacking through East Malaysia, trying to uncover an explanation for her grandfather's murder shortly after the Japanese surrender. "I imagined I would discover the truth about my grandfather, but I wasn't so lucky," she told Stone. "No longer bound by facts, my imagination took over." Many drafts later, the result was *Certainty*.

In the novel, a young Vancouver doctor, Ansel Rensing, is grieving the sudden death of his wife, radio documentarian Gail Lim. Gail's parents, Clara and Matthew, grieve too, but Matthew's grief is complicated by his past. Raised in Sandakan, Matthew survived the brutality of the Japanese occupation during World War II thanks to his friendship with a young girl, Ani, and his father's collaboration with the Japanese. But collaboration did not spare Matthew's father a Japanese bullet in the brain.

After the war, Matthew and Ani renewed their friendship in Australia. Matthew moved on to a new life in Vancouver where he worked as a restaurant cook and his wife, Clara, a schoolteacher, worked as a seamstress. But Matthew remained haunted by his ties to Ani and the secrets of his past. His torment and Gail's attempt to uncover her father's secrets provide the sinews that tie together the various skeins of the novel.

Certainty is a sprawling narrative that spans six decades and takes the reader from Vancouver to Amsterdam, Sandakan, Kowloon and Jakarta. The story darts back and forth in time to render different events and locations from varying points of view, cutting back and forth from Gail's life to Matthew's past and Ansel's grief as the principal characters struggle to find some certainty to cling to.

With her first novel, Thien laid to rest any uncertainty as to whether she was capable of delivering on the promise of *Simple Recipes*. Writing in the *Toronto Star*, Philip Marchand noted that "*Certainty* is in the same line as such highly successful works as *The English Patient* and *Fugitive Pieces*. Style, mood and themes are similar in these works, including the use of World War II as backdrop to the spiritual struggles of the characters."

But this was Marchand damning with faint praise: "The point of the novel seems to be confronting the individual past in order to free the individual present. But there is something else going on --- something odd." Marchand was perturbed by what he called the "underlying cuteness" of the characters. "In *Certainty*, even minor characters are endearingly flaky," he wrote. "Mrs. Cho cuts her grass with a pair of scissors. Ed the retired postman throws out in casual conversation 'mathematical equations for the distribution of seeds on a sunflower head.'"

It is those "endearing" idiosyncrasies that sound a false note for Marchand. "Everybody is intellectually curious;" he wrote, "everybody has an artistic side, bordering on the precious. Ansel makes his casseroles 'floor by floor,' topped by a 'skylight of potatoes.'"

Character lies at the heart of every novel, and Marchand clearly found the characters in *Certainty* problematic. And he complained about the current tendency in Canadian literature of relying on World War II as a dramatic backdrop, "as if nothing else can add that element of conflict and adversity. It is

as if the past must be exorcised by the nice, artistic people of the present, the new generation adept with guitars and art photography and flower gardens and complicated casseroles."

Few critics shared Marchand's qualms about the novel. Typical of most reviews was Julie Mason's in the *Ottawa Citizen*: "Thien takes enormous risks in letting the story sprawl across geography and generations, but she is accomplished enough to never let it feel out of control or unfocused."

Reviewing the book for *Quill & Quire*, Bronwyn Drainie concurred. "As I read Madeleine Thien's first novel," wrote Drainie, "I was reminded time and again of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, another work set largely in Canada but taking as its canvas the memories and unresolved legacies of the Second World War. There is a huge difference in tone between the novels --- Michaels' feels carved out of solid dark mahogany, while Thien's is like an airy house on stilts --- but both employ science and the natural world as metaphors to explore the mysterious human layers of memory, loss, and love."

Drainie took exception to the unlikely scientific jargon spilling from the lips of Thien's characters, but not enough to diminish her enthusiasm for the novel. "There is unbearable sadness here, and yet there is hope as well," wrote Drainie. "Thien's message, an ancient one, is that the truth will set you free. Reaching certainty about what happened in the past will not make the present and future more certain, but it will make 'the indefinite, the uncertain hereafter' a more bearable, more human place."

All in all, Thien could not have wished for better reviews. Having struck a responsive chord in reviewers and readers, her first novel looks certain to climb the bestseller charts everywhere. McClelland & Stewart continues to sell rights into foreign territories, and there are rumours of a motion picture based on the book.

Grief, an emotion that spares no one, lies at the heart of the book and fuelled its author during much of its creation. "While I was writing the novel, my mom died suddenly," Thien told Chong, "so I started with bereavement, too." And Thien feels privileged to have had a means of coping with her bereavement --- writing *Certainty* was a cathartic experience.

"I felt lucky to be able to put [all that] in a book, because everybody goes through this experience but so often they have no place to put it," Thien told McGillis. "You just have to go on and let time pass. So to be a writer, to have a place to put it and to be able to make meaning out of it, is really a blessed profession."

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Youngest of three children; father was a realtor; mother was a purchasing executive; married Willem Atsma (a biomechanical engineer), 2004. **Education:** Educated at University of British Columbia, B.A., English literature and creative writing and M.F.A., creative writing, 2001. **Addresses:** Publisher--McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 75 Sherbourne Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5A 2P9.

CAREER:

Began career writing short stories; works have appeared in many Canadian literary journals and anthologies such as *Best Canadian Stories*, *The Journey Prize Anthology*, *Islands West: Stories from the Coast* and *Write Turns: New Directions in Canadian Fiction*; published first collection of short stories, *Simple Recipes*, 2001; with illustrator Joe Chang, published children's book, *The Chinese Violin*, 2001; published first novel, *Certainty*, 2006.

AWARDS:

Journey Prize shortlist, 1998, for short story "Simple Recipes"; Emerging Writer Award, Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop, 1998, for "Simple Recipes"; City of Vancouver Book Award, best book about Vancouver, 2001, for *Simple Recipes*; VanCity Book Prize, VanCity Credit Union in co-operation with Vancouver Public Library and B.C. Ministry of Women's Equality, best book pertaining to women's issues, 2002, for *Simple Recipes*; Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, West Coast Book Prize Society, 2002, for *Simple Recipes*; Air Canada Award, Canadian Authors Association, 2001, for most promising writer under age of 30; Kiriya Prize Notable Book, Kiriya Pacific Rim Institute, 2001, for *Simple Recipes*.

WORKS:

Selected writings

- *Simple Recipes*, McClelland & Stewart, 2001.
- *The Chinese Violin*, with Joe Chang, Whitecap Books, 2001.
- *Certainty*, McClelland & Stewart, 2006.

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- *Windsor Star*, April 29, 2006, pp. F7, H3.

Madeleine Thien

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About this Person

Born: 1974 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
Nationality: Canadian
Occupation: Writer
Updated: Feb. 10, 2017

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born 1974, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; married Willem Atsma (a research scientist), 2004. **Education:** Attended Simon Fraser University; University of British Columbia, B.A., M.F.A.
Addresses: Home: Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

CAREER:

Writer. City University of Hong Kong, China, member of international faculty, 2010-15; Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada, writer in residence, 2013. Formerly worked in botany department, University of British Columbia, and as an editor for *Ricepaper*.

AWARDS:

Fiddlehead Short Fiction Contest winner, for "House;" Emerging Writer Award, Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop, 1998; Air Canada Award, Canadian Authors Association, 2001, notable book citation, Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize, 2001, VanCity Book Prize, Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, and City of Vancouver Book Award, 2002, all for *Simple Recipes*; First Novel Award, Amazon.ca and Books in Canada, 2007, and the Ovid Festival Prize, 2010, both for *Certainty*; deLiBeraturpreis, Frankfurt Book Fair, 2015, for *Dogs at the Perimeter*; Scotiabank Giller Prize and Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, both 2016, both for *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*; Specsavers Fiction (with a sense of place) Award, 2017, for *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Simple Recipes* (short stories), Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Chinese Violin* (juvenile), illustrated by Joe Chang, Whitecap Books (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada), 2001.
- *Certainty* (novel), McClelland & Stewart (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2006, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2007.

- *Dogs at the Perimeter* (novel), McClelland & Stewart (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2011.
- *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (novel), Knopf Canada (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2016.

Contributor of short stories to anthologies, including *Best Canadian Stories*, 1998, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories*, *The Broadview Introduction to Literature*, *Literature: A Pocket Anthology*, and *The Journey Prize Anthology*, 1998. Contributor to periodicals, including *Granta*, *Financial Times*, *PEN America*, *Five Dials*, *Brick*, *Warscapes*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *National Post*, *Globe & Mail*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *Asia Literary Review*, and the *London Guardian*.

Sidelights

Madeleine Thien published her first collection of short stories, *Simple Recipes*, in 2001. Thien's tales of fractured family relationships and painful coming-of-age moments are mainly set in Vancouver, British Columbia, where she was born to Malaysian-Chinese immigrants in 1974. Some of the stories were completed in the early 1990s, when Thien was a student at the University of British Columbia. Whatever their provenance, the seven pieces collected in *Simple Recipes* earned Thien an international, and appreciative, audience.

Although her prose is marked by "austere grace and polished assurance," to quote *New York Times Book Review* contributor Janice P. Nimura, Thien writes in *Simple Recipes* of the deepest sort of pain and guilt. Parents desert children, marriages hang by slender threads, and youngsters struggle to avoid repeating the poor choices of their parents' generation.

"These stories are heartbreaking," Ginny Merdes wrote in the *Seattle Times*. She went on to add: "Thien paints the human condition as complex and often missing joy." In the story "Simple Recipes," for instance, a girl watches her father prepare dinner carefully, almost ritualistically, and then is stunned into a new awareness when he brutally beats her older brother during an argument. The two sisters in "House" keep a lonely vigil in front of the home they occupied with their alcoholic mother until she deserted them--today is their mother's birthday, the only day of the year on which she stays sober. Miriam, the central character in "A Map of the City," cannot reconcile herself to her immigrant father's failure as a parent, a husband, and a businessman. "Dysfunction and despair are the themes of this graceful debut collection," stated a contributor for *Publishers Weekly*, concluding that Thien is "a writer to watch."

Thien teamed with visual artist Joe Chang to produce a children's book, *The Chinese Violin*. Based on a short film Chang produced himself, *The Chinese Violin* offers a frank tale of young Lin Lin's difficulties assimilating to her new home in Canada after she and her father arrive from China. Both Lin Lin and her father take solace in their Chinese violin, which her father plays on the corner until he is assaulted and the instrument is destroyed. When all hope seems lost, Lin Lin and her father dedicate themselves to hard work and education that will lead them to feel more at home in their new environment. Soon they have earned enough money to buy a new Chinese violin, which Lin Lin learns to play. *School Library Journal* contributor Margaret A. Chang called *The Chinese Violin* a "sweet, predictable story" with an "appealing" message.

Certainty, Thien's first novel, tells the story of Gail Lim, an Asian-Canadian writer for the radio whose grandfather was killed under suspicious circumstances during World War II. The book is told in flashbacks, starting with Lim's own death and then looking back to uncover her family's secrets. Writing the book allowed Thien to examine her own family's complex past. Ian McGillis, writing for *MBR*, said of the book: "Its grappling with big ideas never gets in the way of its storytelling imperative." Sally Ito, in a review for *Prairie Fire Online*, called Thien's effort "a remarkable debut."

In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Thien's 2016 novel, she tells intersecting stories featuring characters of Chinese descent. Set during the 1960s in Shanghai, a composer named Sparrow and his musician friends deal with the Communist party's negative stance on Western classical music during the Cultural Revolution. In the present day, a Vancouver academic named Marie delves into her ancestors' history, including her father's suicide. She befriends Ai-ming, a Chinese woman who left her home country after the Tiananmen Square uprisings. It is revealed that Ai-ming's father was Sparrow. In an interview with David Chau, contributor to the *Straight* Web site, Thien discussed writing about Tiananmen Square. She stated: "It's something that's always stayed with me from that time I was fourteen turning fifteen. ... I think in all these years since, twenty-seven years now, it's been a topic that I've returned again and again to in my interests. But it's only in the last five or six years that I thought I was ready to write about it."

Writing on the *Globe and Mail* Web site, David B. Hobbs commented: "Although ostensibly a historical novel about two of the most significant moments in recent Chinese history, Thien has written a supple epic about that which remains behind after each new beginning. *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is thoroughly researched but without the burden of trivia, both riveting and lyrical." Catherine Taylor, reviewer on the *Financial Times* Web site, suggested: "The book's recounting of the fateful uprisings in the early summer of 1989, of Ai-ming's political awakening and the final reckoning for Sparrow and Kai, is its major accomplishment. It is a highly suspenseful drama; as measured, intoxicating and tragic as Zhuli's violin playing; as courageous and far-reaching as principled resistance itself." "This is a moving and extraordinary evocation of the 20th-century tragedy of China, and deserves to cement Thien's reputation as an important and compelling writer," asserted Isabel Hilton on the *London Guardian* Web site. *Maclean's* critic, Donna Bailey Nurse, remarked: "Thien's novel about a musical family struggling to survive the political upheavals of twentieth-century China is a serious accomplishment."

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FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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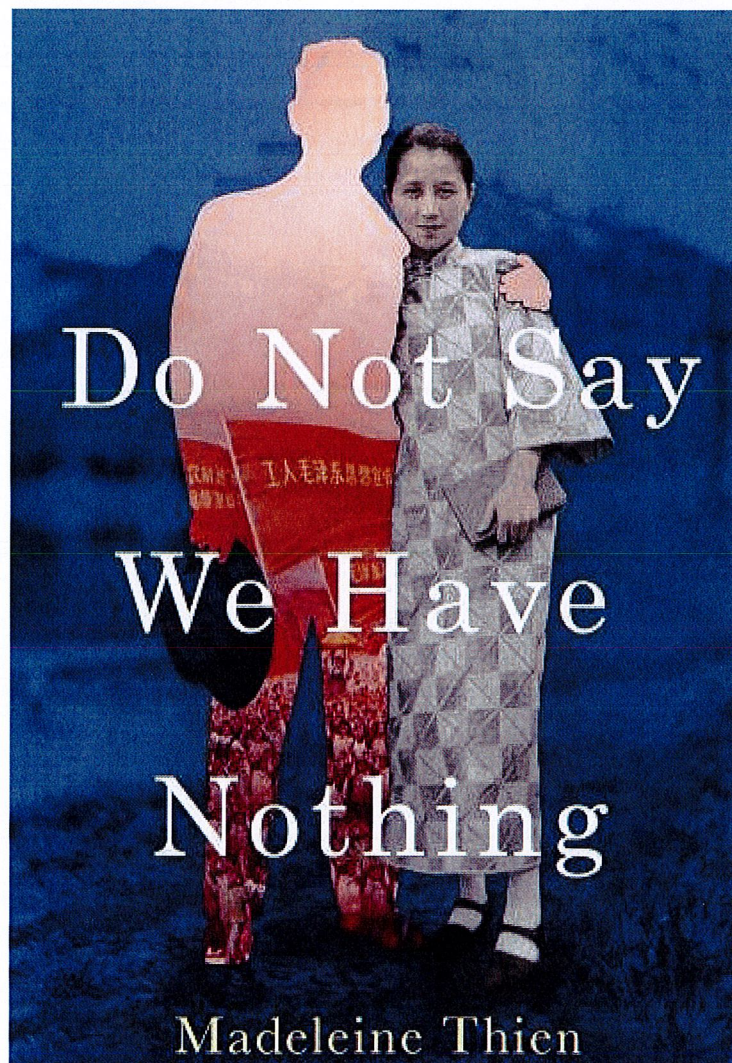
A Conversation with Madeleine Thien, author of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*



sybilbaker

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When Madeleine Thien first kindly agreed to do this interview in May 2016, her novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* was soon to be published in Canada and England, but there was as yet no publisher for it in the US. Since I was unable to get a copy of the novel in the States, she sent me a galley PDF. I started reading the novel PDF when I was in South Africa in July, but I was so taken with it, I knew I had to read it in its proper book form. When I came back to the States in August, I ordered the novel internationally and waited for it to arrive. By the time I'd received my copy and started reading it, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* was on its way to being something big, and deservedly so. It is a structurally complex novel that is large in scope and heart, a novel very much for our times.

Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and winner of the Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, and a *New York Times* best book for 2016, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* traces the lives of three Chinese musicians and their legacy from Mao's Cultural Revolution to Tiananmen Square to the present. In the past few years, we have witnessed the deterioration of artistic and political freedom in Hong Kong. Today, as I prepare this interview for posting, *The Guardian* has published an article whose headline reads "In Hong Kong's Book Industry 'everybody is scared.'"

Now that *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is available in the US, I'm very happy that Americans will have a chance to read more from this gifted and generous writer.

This interview was conducted by email.

SB: We met through the City University of Hong Kong's MFA program in the summer of 2011. Your novel *Dogs at the Perimeter* had just been released. I was still haunted by my own trip to Cambodia in 1997, and loved the way you captured that haunting quality in your novel. I read recently that you started *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* as a way to explore some of the unresolved questions from *Dogs at the Perimeter*, allowing yourself a more expansive canvas. Can you comment a bit more on what those questions are and the initial process of writing *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*?

MT: At first, I thought I was tracing ideas backwards, particularly the trajectory of Marxist thought in Asia, and the relationship between Pol Pot's Cambodia and Mao Zedong's China. One of Mao's high level military intelligence officers, Kang Sheng, was instrumental in aligning Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge.

As the novel grew, I found I was returning to a very particular unresolved question in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, the complexity and pain of survival; how people live on in the immediate aftermath as well as the long aftermath; how people learn to silence themselves, to speak, to be silent again, to speak. That survival is a life's work, a double helix of forgetting and remembering.

The two novels are different shapes in time and space. The Cambodian genocide took place over approximately four years; the political campaigns in China spanned decades. 2016 is a very particular moment. Mao Zedong was in power for 27 years, until his death in 1977; and it's been 27 years since the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. I think, in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, there's a counting up and a counting down of time, an effort to make visible patterns in history, the idea of the Year Zero or the Ground Zero, these rifts in society which we keep recreating, and to which we keep returning.

“I found that listening to Bach or Prokofiev or Shostakovich was enriching, the music opened up my imagination and my conceptual awareness in unexpected ways. The structures of their symphonies, partitas, sonatas, variations, etc., all worked their way into my consciousness as ways of thinking and forms of narrative. Arrivals, departures, and returns.”

SB: While I was reading *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, I couldn't sleep well at night. The scenes from the Cultural Revolution — those last days Sparrow, Kai, and Zhuli were together and the aftermath of that that time were unsettling and hard to read. I hung out with you for a few weeks for three summers when you were working on this novel, and you were always so committed to teaching and being part of the MFA program. Now I wonder how you separated the intensity and singularity of the world of your novel with your own life while you were writing it.

But I found that listening to Bach or Prokofiev or Shostakovich was enriching, the music opened up my imagination and my conceptual awareness in unexpected ways. The structures of their symphonies, partitas, sonatas, variations, etc., all worked their way into my consciousness as ways of thinking and forms of narrative. Arrivals, departures, and returns.

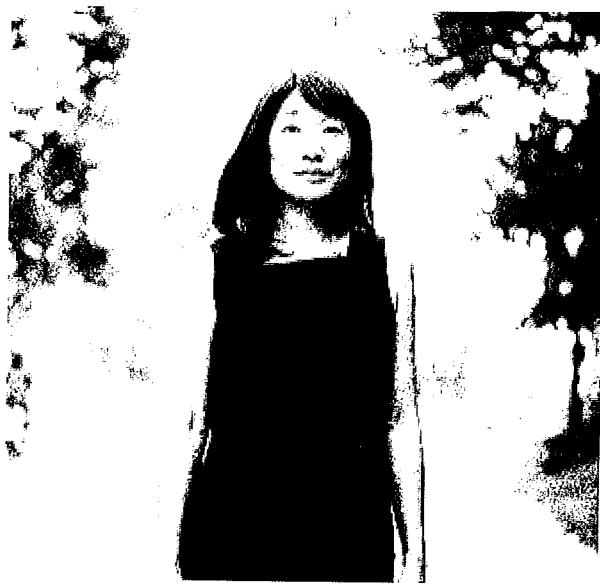
MT: Oh, Sybil. This is a very moving question to me. While I was teaching, the world of the novel never really left my consciousness. China was unfolding in my imagination, anchored to things I was seeing in the present. The ardour and the desires of the students, the politics of the moment, the everyday things in Hong Kong that go unnoticed, the relentless forces of centralized power: all these things were part of my mental landscape. The past is written all over the present, nothing has gone away in Hong Kong, in China, or in our societies, even when the past is unremarked upon.

It's also true that the most difficult writing was done in near isolation, often in China where I would work 12 to 14 hour days, and then wander through the streets at night. During those intensive writing times, I never fully emerged from the world of the novel. Sparrow, Zhuli, and Kai were always with me.

SB: The use of music as the architecture for the novel helped me navigate its complex narrative structure. Can you describe how you came to this narrative structure? Was this something that helped scaffold the novel for you, or did that come with later revisions?

MT: Scaffolding is the perfect word. The structures came very naturally, perhaps because I was listening to so much music as I was writing, and I had never done this before. I used to think that I needed complete, or near complete, silence to write. But I found that listening to Bach or Prokofiev or Shostakovich was enriching, the music opened up my imagination and my conceptual awareness in unexpected ways. The structures of their symphonies, partitas, sonatas, variations, etc., all worked their way into my consciousness as ways of thinking and forms of narrative. Arrivals, departures, and returns.

SB: I love your use of the nonverbal forms of language in the novel. Were you able to integrate the nonverbal forms from the beginning or did that come at a later stage in the manuscript?



Madeleine Thien © Rawi Hage

MT: They were there almost from the beginning. I think I rewrote the first 40 to 50 pages multiple times, and then, once Marie became clear, the nonverbal forms of language became inseparable from her — mathematical equations, Chinese ideograms, even the shape of the conductor's hand movements as she or he counts time. I was struck by descriptions of musicians and composers sitting down to read scores, as if they were text. And, like text, the reader hears everything — the voice, the music — in his or her mind. I think the photographs came later. They became part of Marie's archive, when initially they had been part of mine.

“My first encounters with classical music were all through ballet and dance and so, to me, music has always been intertwined with movement, with dance and the narrative of dance. The challenge was using language to express the dimensionality and physicality of music.”

SB: I read that you first went to university on a dance scholarship. As much as your novel “reads” musically, I can also read it as a dance — dance of language, characters, place,

and time. Some of my favorite authors like Paul Bowles and Thomas Bernhard come from a musical background. Has your study of dance influenced your writing?

MT: I think it has, and I think, potentially, the more I allow it to inflect my writing, the more it will. My instincts are gestural and tonal, and this is evident in my previous books, particularly *Dogs at the Perimeter*. *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is a bit of a departure. It's epic in scale, and even though it's not linear, it's more linear than any other work I've ever made.

My first encounters with classical music were all through ballet and dance and so, to me, music has always been intertwined with movement, with dance and the narrative of dance. The challenge was using language to express the dimensionality and physicality of music.

SB: I remember watching *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* in Washington, DC in 1994, and reading Bernhard's *The Loser* around the same time. There's a mystique about Gould as an artist. Besides his music, did that mystique as a musician inform your portrayal of any of the characters?

MT: I read a lot about Glenn Gould as well. I love his particularities, and even though I didn't borrow his eccentricities for my characters, his life gave me freedom to imagine their relationships with music as highly specific and highly personal. It moves me a great deal when musicians tell me that they recognize this intimacy with music, that the novel describes something that is nearly inexpressible not only about creating and performing music, but the quality of devotion itself. I feel so relieved and happy. It is as miraculous to me as it is to them.

SB: We became friends through the amazing low residency MFA program at City University of Hong Kong. Its closure was heartbreaking to all of us, but you were able to articulate our pain through an article in *The Guardian* linking the decision to closing the program to Hong Kong's increasing limiting of free expression. I can see now that as you were finishing your novel, this closure would be even more troubling. The Umbrella Movement is yet another note, a response or an echo to Tiananmen, of the Cultural Revolution, of the Communist Revolution. It is another chapter in the Book of Records. You also mentioned our program and its closing in your Acknowledgements. What advice do you have to artists who find themselves unable to express themselves?

“If a regime or place or ideology wants you to disappear, to live and to continue creating is a form of resistance, especially if it is done with integrity.”

MT: This is the most difficult question of all. There's no question that my reading of events at City University of Hong Kong was informed by the many years I had been thinking about a longer Chinese history. Deep, transformative, and troubling changes to society never happen overnight. The conditions for those change are introduced incrementally, at the margins, in unexpected places. The disappearance of a writing program is very marginal, but it was part of a wider shift in society, and a narrowing down of forms of expression.

Censorship and the closing down of expression take many forms, and one of these is the creation of conditions in which people begin to self-censor. We have this in North America, too. There are certain subjects people will avoid; topics in which we fear we may be out of sync with our peers, friends, families, and social groups. It's easier to express opinions that will result in social validation, rather than social opprobrium.

In China during the Cultural Revolution, there are many moving stories detailing how people hid things, or created in secret, or made use of the arts available to them in order to refine their craft and their skills, so that later on, when they had a different kind of freedom of expression, they had the technical ability to do what their imaginations desired. The artist Xu Bing is a powerful example of this. Shostakovich, who lived during Stalin's Terror and through multiple purges, said something to his students that I've always remembered: “Work, play. You're living here, in this country, and you must see everything as it really is. Don't create illusions. There's no other life. There can't be any. Just be thankful that you're still allowed to breathe.” And I think this pragmatism is very important. If a regime or place or ideology wants you to disappear, to live and to continue creating is a form of resistance, especially if it is done with integrity. Art has the capacity to say multiple things, to camouflage ideas and ways of being. Nothing stays the same forever. It's the line from Bei Dao's poem, “Remember what I say: Not everything will pass.”

Mao Zedong

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About this Person

Born: December 26, 1893 in Shaoshan, China

Died: September 09, 1976 in Beijing, China

Nationality: Chinese

Occupation: Head of state

Other Names: Mao Tse-tung; Chairman Mao

Updated: Jan. 1, 1994

Full Text:

"Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?" Mao Zedong

Among the most important political leaders of the 20th century, Mao Zedong united China after decades of turmoil and laid the foundation for The People's Republic of China.

- 1893 Born in Shaoshan, Hunan, China
- 1913 Entered university
- 1921 Became a founding member of the Chinese Communist party in Shanghai
- 1927 Fled to the mountains in Jiangxi and founded the first revolutionary base area
- 1934 Driven from base; began the Long March
- 1937 Japanese attempted to expand their conquest of China
- 1948 Chinese Civil War began
- 1949 Mao founded the People's Republic of China
- 1966 Began the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution
- 1976 Died at age 83

Mao Zedong was born into a China weakened by over population and economic decline and faced with an inability to halt the aggressive and expanding Western nations in the mid-19th century. While the ostensible causes of conflict were China's refusal to trade with the West, the struggle was really a collision of the traditional Chinese system and the modernizing West. After the British defeated China in a series of clashes called the Opium Wars (1839-42), the country was opened to foreign trade and influences with which it was ill-prepared to cope. The Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), an immense Civil War, began in this confusion. As many as 40 million Chinese may have died, including millions in Hunan, where Mao would be born in the aftermath of this chaos in 1893.

The traditional Chinese political system was a monarchy headed by hereditary emperors. Each era dominated by a particular family was entitled a "dynasty." When Mao was born, the last dynasty, the Manchu-Qing (Ch'ing), was tottering to its close. But as the Chinese say, "Heaven is high, and the Emperor far away." Where Mao lived, in the small village of Shaoshan in Hunan province in central China below the Yangtze river, people were comparatively isolated.

Mao's father Mao Jen-shen (1870-1920) had been a poor peasant and briefly a soldier. He married an older woman, Wen Qimei (Wen Ch'i-mei) (d. 1918), who gave birth first to Mao; then in 1898, to a second brother, Mao Zemin; and in 1905 to a third, Mao Zetan. In that same year, the family also adopted a daughter, Mao Zehung.

In some respects, Mao's childhood was an idyllic one. Unusually tall for his age, he had a strong constitution and an intense manner. The family was increasingly well-off and never lacked, as many Chinese families did, for enough to eat or adequate clothing. The surrounding countryside was a series of beautiful low hills and lovely rice paddies. In one of Mao's many poems, "Return to Shaoshan," translated by Jerome Ch'en and Michael Bullock, he later eulogized the area, saying, "In delight I watched a thousand waves of growing rice."

But Mao's father, deeply marked by his years struggling to survive in rural China and doubtlessly carrying many memories of the starvation and suffering of the Taiping years, ruled the family with an iron hand. He was cruel to family members and hired help alike. Mao and his mother were forced close together by their suffering at his father's hands, and it may be that Mao's unusual sensitivity to the problems of Chinese women, who were greatly oppressed by feudal society, began at this time.

Some scholars have argued that it was Mao Zedong's continual conflicts with his father that set him off on a life of revolution. Whatever the cause, the young Mao seems to have been a rebel from the beginning, rebelling against the constraints of the very hierarchical traditional Chinese family, and particularly, against the foreign domination of his country.

Put to work in the fields at the age of five, Mao had to wait until he was seven, somewhat old for boys in his age group, before he could start school. He read the required works of history and great literature, but he also loved the colorful traditional Chinese novels, like *The Water Margin* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, both lengthy tales of rebels and heroes which have sometimes been compared to the Robin Hood stories. Later, as a rebel at the head of peasant bands, Mao was able to draw on those novels for lessons to be applied in the desperate struggles of guerilla war.

In 1908, Mao's father, in the traditional fashion, tried to arrange a marriage for his son, perhaps to keep him at home and discourage his modern ideas of pursuing an education. Mao refused to recognize the marriage and claimed never to have had a relationship with this local girl, the first of his four wives.

In 1910, Mao was sent to a more modern school in a nearby town, where classmates were mostly sons of wealthier families, and where the rawboned Mao, already hardened by physical labor, was first turned away from the gate on his arrival. But Mao's superior abilities gained him the respect of teachers and classmates alike. He read widely, devouring both the traditional learning and the works of reformers who advocated more modern responses to China's acute problems. In 1911, his abilities took him to the provincial capital, Changsha, and to middle school, where he wished to continue his study. Had China been a stable country, it is probable that Mao would have finished out his life as a scholar. In his old age, he said that he wished to be remembered, above all, as a teacher.

China Under The Weak Rule Of Sun Yat-sen

But during Mao's youth, China was collapsing. The Manchu-Qing dynasty which had conquered China in the 17th century fell apart in 1911. Chinese were briefly optimistic while revolutionaries led by Sun

Yat-sen (1866-1925) seemed to offer hope for a new China. Mao himself was so moved by the promise of revolution that he walked for days to Wuhan, where Sun's Republican forces were taking the city from Manchu troops. Here Mao saw his first sizeable city, and his first battle with its inevitable streets full of corpses. He served for some time in the Republican ranks, though he did not fight.

But Sun Yat-sen proved unable to consolidate a unified government, and by 1916, China was in the grip of military men, the "Warlords." Some of these men were true patriots who ruled skillfully and wisely, others were brutal adventurers who taxed and pillaged the peasants beyond endurance.

From 1913 to 1918, Mao studied at the provincial teacher's training college in Changsha. There he read widely in Western works, and in the radical Chinese writings of the "New Culture Movement" which was then sweeping China. Throwing himself into the political life of the day, Mao formed student groups, founded a special school to teach workers to read, edited literary and political magazines, demonstrated against the warlord governor of the province, protested school rules which hampered student political activity, and published an article in *New Youth*, the central journal of the nationwide protest movement. He somehow also found time to fall in love with Yang K'ai-hui, the daughter of a favorite professor, and in 1920, married her. She bore him a son.

While student radicals and intellectuals like Mao were interested in Western learning, they were also exceptionally critical of Western thought which seemed to often be contradicted by Western actions which tore at China's vitals. The warlords depended to a large degree on Western sources of arms and munitions, and Western countries competed eagerly to make extortionate loans and unequal treaties which eroded Chinese sovereignty. Chinese reformers like Sun Yat-sen could not gain international support for unifying China, because foreign governments rightly suspected that any real Chinese government would be aggressively nationalist and would attempt to rectify foreign domination of a divided China.

Interest In Marxism Leads To Formation Of Communist Groups

For Chinese reformers, the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1918 was an intoxicating event. Led by Lenin, the Bolsheviks destroyed the tsarist autocracy and established a revolutionary government. Chinese were drawn to the Russian example because there were many superficial similarities between the two countries. Both were traditional monarchies, both were largely backward and agrarian, and, to the Chinese, Russia was as much Asian as European. Chinese interest in the Russian revolution soon led them to Lenin and to Karl Marx.

The Russian revolutionaries were equally interested in China. Fearing that the Western powers, especially Great Britain, were determined to stifle their infant revolution, the Russians eagerly sought allies. It was obvious to them that China was on the verge of some titanic upheaval which, with proper assistance, might become a second Communist revolution. The Russians sent political advisors to the radical Chinese groups.

From earnest circles of students reading Marxist literature, like one in which Mao himself was engaged, small Communist groups began to emerge. In 1921, when some of these men met in Shanghai--the great Chinese city at the mouth of the Yangtze river--to found the Chinese Communist party, Mao was one of them.

Although Mao was soon a convinced Marxist, he was always clear that for him Marxism was not an end in itself, and certainly not a doctrine that would ever lead him to subordinate China to Russia, but an instrument with which to free China. As Mao said, "Marxism is the arrow with which we will hit the target of the Chinese revolution."

But for young Chinese Communists, life in the 1920s was very complex. As the Russians looked about China, they found their interests drawn not to the nascent Chinese Communist party, but to a far

larger and better organized group, the Nationalist party (*Kuomintang*; often known as the KMT), begun by Sun Yat-sen. As a frustrated Chinese Nationalist, Sun Yat-sen welcomed help from any quarter. With Soviet assistance, he built a military organization and modern party along Soviet lines, then prepared for a march north from his base in the south at Canton to defeat the warlords and unify China.

The Communist party agreed to Soviet demands that they cooperate with the KMT. The young Communists threw their energies into helping prepare the way for the march north. Mao, because of his charisma, his experience, and his peasant background, soon became the group's primary activist among Chinese peasants. But as Mao studied peasant suffering and recalled his life as a child in the countryside, he began to make an important break with orthodox Marxist doctrines.

According to Marx and Lenin, the heart of any revolutionary Communist movement had to be urban workers or the *proletariat*. Mao observed that the peasants were not only far more numerous than China's minuscule *proletariat*, but were themselves spontaneously rising from centuries of misery at the hands of rural landlords to create their own revolutions. As Mao said in his report on an "Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" in March of 1927:

The present upsurge of the peasant movement is a colossal event. In a very short time, in China's central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back.

This was the key realization of Mao's life, and from it came his central strategy: the peasants would be the backbone of the Chinese revolution. Whoever gave them proper leadership and genuinely served their interests would lead China.

The Chinese Communist Revolution

The march north, "The Northern Expedition," began in 1926 and was quickly successful. The combination of Communist agitation and propaganda among rural masses and the modern KMT military machine was irresistible. While some warlords fought and were defeated, others simply joined the KMT, now led by Chiang Kai-shek, following Sun Yat-sen's death in 1925. But the KMT/Communist alliance papered over real differences between the two groups. The Nationalists wanted a political revolution which would produce a united Chinese government, dominated by themselves, which would uphold the old social relationships of Chinese society. The Communists wanted a social revolution which would turn the countryside over to the peasantry and the cities to the workers, both led, of course, by them. In April of 1927, just after his troops reached Shanghai--China's greatest city--Chiang Kai-shek turned on the communists and massacred thousands of them.

This event began years of marching and counter-marching for Mao Zedong. He frequently led badly armed groups of Communist fighters to try to seize cities from the Nationalists, a strategy with which he himself disagreed. But Mao was only one of many Communists, and bound to follow orders as the party groped for a strategy. These were terrible years, and many were killed, among them Mao's wife, Yang K'ai-hui, and his sister, Mao Zehung.

Mao was to lose many more friends and relatives to the revolution. Some scholars have argued that it was this blood-debt which he felt he owed to those who died winning the Chinese Communist revolution which later made him so uncompromising and fierce a defender of it.

Mao felt that the revolution's only hope of survival was to create base areas in remote mountainous regions. During the next seven years, his success in surviving and his success in building strong rebel governments in these base areas made him more and more important. Meanwhile the KMT redoubled its efforts to destroy the Communists, and in 1934, after a series of four previous attempts, succeeded

in driving the Communists from their last sanctuary. Among the wounded who had to be abandoned to certain death was Mao Zetan, Mao's youngest brother, the second of his siblings to perish in the revolution. Having remarried, Mao left his son and several daughters behind with peasants as the exodus began. He was not able to locate the children after the revolution.

The Long March

This epic flight from the south to another base area in the north at Yen'an (Yan'an) lasted from 1934 to 1935 (until 1936 for some units) and covered more than 6,000 miles. The Communists fought constant battles and skirmishes, suffered incredible deprivations and hardships, and again, countless numbers died. Mao's wife, He Zizhen (Ho Tzu-chen), is said to have suffered 20 shrapnel wounds but survived. This "Long March" was the formative event of the Chinese Communist Revolution. It was on the Long March that Mao became the undisputed head of the Chinese Communist party, the "Chairman," a post he was to hold the rest of his long life. Mao's poem "The Long March" written in September of 1935, translated by Ch'en and Bullock, captures the feeling of the event:

The Red Army Fears not the trials of the Long March And thinks nothing of a thousand mountains and rivers. The Wuling Ridges spread out like Ripples; The Wumeng Ranges roll like balls of clay. Warmly are the cliffs wrapped in clouds and washed by the Gold Sand; Chilly are the iron chains lying across the width of the Great Ferry. A thousand acres of snow on the Min Mountains delight My troops who have just left them behind.

When Mao and the Communist survivors arrived in the north, they found the situation facing them radically changed. The Japanese, who had first attacked China in 1895, had continuously expanded their control over north China. In 1937, the smoldering conflict became the Sino-Japanese war, and after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, China became a theater of World War II. This national emergency pushed the KMT and the Communists back into another uneasy truce, frequently violated by both sides. American desires to defeat the Japanese as expeditiously as possible led the American government to throw its support to Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT, despite the doubts of many Americans as to the long-term viability of the Chiang regime, often viewed as backward and corrupt.

Founding Of People's Republic Of China

In 1945, the war ended unexpectedly with the use of Atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The KMT and the Communists prepared to fight each other once again. After attempts to mediate, the United States abandoned China to its fate. The KMT had superior weapons, extensive American aid, and many more troops, but the Communists had the fervor of the peasants, and Mao's organizational superiority. In October of 1949, the victorious Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China. As Mao put it, the Chinese people had "stood up."

But Mao was a Communist and a Soviet ally. He had overthrown Chiang Kai-shek, an American ally. In the hostile atmosphere of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, China and the United States were fated to be enemies.

Had Mao died at the initial victory of the revolution, he would have been at the apogee of his power and reputation. But now he had to institutionalize his victory and create a modern state. Mao was a brilliant intellectual, a superb organizer, a canny military commander, but an inexperienced economist. After initial attempts to copy Soviet patterns of development, he grew impatient at the slow pace of progress. Above all, the Soviet model did not greatly improve the lot of Chinese peasants, the one group with which he most identified. In 1954, Mao led China into the "Great Leap Forward," a series of ill-advised economic experiments which deemphasized planning, while emphasizing human will and mass participation. When this failed at enormous human costs, the other leaders of the Communist party began to reduce Mao's power. Mao felt that the party and governmental bureaucracy were resisting necessary change because they had become selfish and complacent. He responded in 1966

with another mass movement, the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," an attack from below on the two bureaucracies. Mao's allies were other radicals and China's youth, the fervent "Red Guard" who eagerly threw themselves at the establishment. China was in upheaval. Schools and factories were closed, pitched battles fought in the streets, and the army began to fragment. Even Mao could not stand this degree of disorder and by 1969 began to slow the frenzied attack.

Mao was now in his late 70s and physically debilitated, suffering from a lifetime of hardship and Parkinson's Disease. To what degree his radical actions of his late life were due to his illness and age is hotly debated by analysts. The next few years saw a series of radical reversals in Chinese politics as others maneuvered to succeed Mao upon his imminent death. One of his last major acts was to reopen contact with the United States. In September of 1976, Mao Zedong died.

Mao stands astride Chinese history like a colossus. Only one or two other Chinese leaders in the several thousand years of Chinese history can even be compared with him. He is indisputably one of the pre-eminent, if not most eminent, political leaders of any country in the 20th century. If Mao stood for any one thing in his life, it was for the importance of speaking up for the most neglected group in Chinese history, the peasantry. He believed above all in the perfectibility of man, and that mankind can throw off the shackles of history and change culture for the better. In pursuit of these goals, he could be violent and uncompromising.

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Name variations: Mao Tse-tung. Pronunciation: Mao Zeh-doong. Born in December 1893 in Shaoshan in Hunan province; died on September 9, 1976; son of Mao Jen-shen and Wen Qimei (Wen Ch'i-mei); married: first wife chosen by his family when Mao was 14 (marriage unconsummated); married: Yang K'ai-hui, 1920 (divorced 1930); married: He Zizhen (Ho Tzu-chen) (divorced 1937); married: Jiang Qing (Chiang Ch'ing; committed suicide in Beijing on May 14, 1991); children: at least seven.

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Cultural Revolution

in full Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Chinese (Pinyin) Wuchan jieji Wenhua Dageming or (Wade-Giles romanization) Wu-ch'an Chieh-chi Wen-hua Ta Ke-ming

in full Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Chinese (Pinyin) Wuchan jieji Wenhua Dageming or (Wade-Giles romanization) Wu-ch'an Chieh-chi Wen-hua Ta Ke-ming upheaval launched by Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong during his last decade in power (1966–76) to renew the spirit of the Chinese Revolution. Fearing that China would develop along the lines of the Soviet model and concerned about his own place in history, Mao threw China's cities into turmoil in a monumental effort to reverse the historic processes underway.

Background

During the early 1960s, tensions with the Soviet Union convinced Mao that the Russian Revolution had gone astray, which in turn made him fear that China would follow the same path. Programs carried out by his colleagues to bring China out of the economic depression caused by the Great Leap Forward made Mao doubt their revolutionary commitment and also resent his own diminished role. He especially feared urban social stratification in a society as traditionally elitist as China. Mao thus ultimately adopted four goals for the Cultural Revolution: to replace his designated successors with leaders more faithful to his current thinking; to rectify the Chinese Communist Party; to provide China's youths with a revolutionary experience; and to achieve some specific policy changes so as to make the educational, health care, and cultural systems less elitist. He initially pursued these goals through a massive mobilization of the country's urban youths. They were organized into groups called the Red Guards, and Mao ordered the party and the army not to suppress the movement.

Mao also put together a coalition of associates to help him carry out the Cultural Revolution. His wife, Jiang Qing, brought in a group of radical intellectuals to rule the cultural realm. Defense Minister Lin Biao made certain that the military remained Maoist. Mao's longtime assistant, Chen Boda, worked with security men Kang Sheng and Wang Dongxing to carry out Mao's directives concerning ideology and security. Premier Zhou Enlai played an essential role in keeping the country running, even during periods of extraordinary chaos. Yet there were conflicts among these associates, and the history of the Cultural Revolution reflects these conflicts almost as much as it reflects Mao's own initiatives.

The early period (1966–68)

Mao's concerns about "bourgeois" infiltrators in his party and government—those not sharing his vision of communism—were outlined in a Chinese Communist Party Central Committee document issued on May 16, 1966; this is considered by many historians to be the start of the Cultural Revolution, although Mao did not formally launch the Cultural Revolution until August 1966, at the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee. He shut down China's schools, and during the following months he encouraged Red Guards to attack all traditional values and "bourgeois" things and to test party officials by publicly criticizing them. Mao believed that this measure would be beneficial both for the young people and for the party cadres that they attacked.

The movement quickly escalated; many elderly people and intellectuals not only were verbally attacked but were physically abused. Many died. The Red Guards splintered into zealous rival factions, each purporting to be the true representative of Maoist thought. Mao's own personality cult, encouraged so as to provide momentum to the movement, assumed religious proportions. The resulting anarchy, terror, and paralysis completely disrupted the urban economy. Industrial production for 1968 dipped 12 percent below that of 1966.

During the earliest part of the Red Guard phase, key Politburo leaders were removed from power—most notably President Liu Shaoqi, Mao's designated successor until that time, and Party General Secretary Deng Xiaoping. In January 1967 the movement began to produce the actual overthrow of provincial party committees and the first attempts to construct new political bodies to replace them. In February 1967 many remaining top party leaders called

for a halt to the Cultural Revolution, but Mao and his more radical partisans prevailed, and the movement escalated yet again. Indeed, by the summer of 1967, disorder was widespread; large armed clashes between factions of Red Guards were occurring throughout urban China.

During 1967 Mao called on the army under Lin Biao to step in on behalf of the Red Guards. Instead of producing unified support for the radical youths, this political-military action resulted in more divisions within the military. The tensions inherent in the situation surfaced vividly when Chen Zaidao, a military commander in the city of Wuhan during the summer of 1967, arrested two key radical party leaders.

In 1968, after the country had been subject to several cycles of radicalism alternating with relative moderation, Mao decided to rebuild the Communist Party to gain greater control. The military dispatched officers and soldiers to take over schools, factories, and government agencies. The army simultaneously forced millions of urban Red Guards to move to the rural hinterland to live, thus scattering their forces and bringing some order to the cities. This particular action reflected Mao's disillusionment with the Red Guards because of their inability to overcome their factional differences. Mao's efforts to end the chaos were given added impetus by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which greatly heightened China's sense of insecurity.

Two months later, the Twelfth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee met to call for the convening of a party congress and the rebuilding of the party apparatus. From that point, the issue of who would inherit political power as the Cultural Revolution wound down became the central question of Chinese politics.

Rise and fall of Lin Biao (1969–71)

When the Ninth Party Congress convened in April 1969, Defense Minister Lin Biao was officially designated as Mao's successor, and the military tightened its grip on the entire society. Both the Party Central Committee and the revamped Communist Party were dominated by military men. Lin took advantage of Sino-Soviet border clashes in the spring of 1969 to declare martial law and further used his position to rid himself of some potential rivals to the succession. Several leaders who had been purged during 1966–68 died under the martial law regimen of 1969, and many others suffered severely during this period.

Lin quickly encountered opposition. Mao himself was wary of a successor who seemed to want to assume power too quickly, and he began to maneuver against Lin. Premier Zhou Enlai joined forces with Mao in this effort, as possibly did Mao's wife Jiang Qing. Mao's assistant Chen Boda, however, decided to support Lin's cause. Thus, despite many measures taken in 1970–71 to return order and normalcy to Chinese society, increasingly severe strains were splitting the top ranks of leadership.

These strains first surfaced at a party plenum in the summer of 1970. Shortly thereafter Mao began a campaign to criticize Chen Boda as a warning to Lin. Chen disappeared from public view in August 1970. Matters came to a head in September 1971 when Lin himself was killed in what the Chinese asserted was an attempt to flee to the Soviet Union after an abortive assassination plot against Mao. Virtually the entire Chinese high military command was purged in the weeks following Lin's death.

Lin's demise had a profoundly disillusioning effect on many people who had supported Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Lin had been the high priest of the Mao cult, and millions had gone through tortuous struggles to elevate this chosen successor to power and throw out his "revisionist" challengers. They had in this quest attacked and tortured respected teachers, abused elderly citizens, humiliated old revolutionaries, and, in many cases, battled former friends in bloody confrontations. The sordid details of Lin's purported assassination plot and subsequent flight cast all this in the light of traditional, unprincipled power struggles, and vast numbers of Chinese people began to feel that they simply had been manipulated for personal political purposes.

Final years (1972–76)

Initially, Premier Zhou Enlai benefited the most from Lin's death, and from late 1971 through mid-1973 Zhou tried to nudge China back toward stability. He encouraged a revival of the educational system and brought back into office a number of people who had been cast out. China began again to increase its trade and other links with the outside

world, and the economy continued the forward momentum that had begun to build in 1969. Mao personally approved these general moves but remained wary lest they call into question the basic value of having launched the Cultural Revolution in the first place.

During 1972, however, Mao suffered a serious stroke, and Zhou learned that he had a fatal malignancy. These events highlighted the continued uncertainty over the succession. In early 1973 Zhou and Mao brought back to power Deng Xiaoping. Zhou hoped to groom him to be Mao's successor. Deng, however, had been the second most important purge victim at the hands of the radicals during the Cultural Revolution. His reemergence made Jiang Qing and her followers desperate to firmly establish a more radical path.

From mid-1973 until Mao's death in September 1976, Chinese politics shifted back and forth between Jiang Qing and those who supported her (notably Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan, who with Jiang Qing were later dubbed the Gang of Four), and the Zhou-Deng group. The former favoured ideology, political mobilization, class struggle, anti-intellectualism, egalitarianism, and xenophobia, while the latter promoted economic growth, stability, educational progress, and a pragmatic foreign policy. Mao tried unsuccessfully to maintain a balance between these two forces while he struggled to find a successor who would embody his preferred combination of each.

From mid-1973 until mid-1974 the radicals were ascendant; they whipped up a campaign that used criticism of Lin Biao and of Confucius as a thinly veiled vehicle for attacking Zhou and his policies. By July 1974, however, the resulting economic decline and increasing chaos made Mao shift back toward Zhou and Deng. With Zhou hospitalized, Deng assumed increasing power from the summer of 1974 through the late fall of 1975, when the radicals finally convinced Mao that Deng's policies would lead eventually to a repudiation of the Cultural Revolution and of Mao himself. Mao then sanctioned criticism of these policies by means of wall posters (*dazibao*), which had become a favoured method of propaganda for the radicals. Zhou died in January 1976, and Deng was formally purged (with Mao's backing) in April. Only Mao's death in September and the purge of the Gang of Four by a coalition of political, police, and military leaders in October 1976 paved the way for Deng's subsequent reemergence in 1977.

Assessment

Although the Cultural Revolution largely bypassed the vast majority of the people who lived in rural areas, it had serious consequences for China as a whole. In the short run, of course, the political instability and the constant shifts in economic policy produced slower economic growth and a decline in the capacity of the government to deliver goods and services. Officials at all levels of the political system learned that future shifts in policy would jeopardize those who had aggressively implemented previous policy. The result was bureaucratic timidity. In addition, with the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution (the Cultural Revolution was officially ended by the Eleventh Party Congress in August 1977, but it in fact concluded with Mao's death and the purge of the Gang of Four in the fall of 1976), nearly three million party members and countless wrongfully purged citizens awaited reinstatement. Bold measures were taken in the late 1970s to confront these immediate problems, but the Cultural Revolution left a legacy that continued to trouble China.

There existed, for example, a severe generation gap; individuals who experienced the Cultural Revolution while in their teens and early twenties were denied an education and taught to redress grievances by taking to the streets. Post-Cultural Revolution policies—which stressed education and initiative over radical revolutionary fervour—left little room for these millions of people to have productive careers. Indeed, the fundamental damage to all aspects of the educational system itself took several decades to repair.

Another serious problem was the corruption within the party and government. Both the fears engendered by the Cultural Revolution and the scarcity of goods that accompanied it forced people to fall back on traditional personal relationships and on bribery and other forms of persuasion to accomplish their goals. Concomitantly, the Cultural Revolution brought about general disillusionment with the party leadership and the system itself as millions of urban Chinese witnessed the obvious power plays that took place under the name of political principle in the early and mid-1970s. The post-Mao repudiation of both the objectives and the consequences of the Cultural Revolution made many people turn away from politics altogether.

Among the people themselves, there remained bitter factionalism, as those who opposed each other during the Cultural Revolution often shared the same work unit and would do so for their entire careers.

Perhaps never before in human history has a political leader unleashed such massive forces against the system that he created. The resulting damage to that system was profound, and the goals that Mao sought to achieve ultimately remained elusive.

Kenneth G. Lieberthal EB Editors

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Tiananmen Square incident

also called June Fourth incident or 6/4

also called June Fourth incident or 6/4 series of protests and demonstrations in China in the spring of 1989 that culminated on the night of June 3–4 with a government crackdown on the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Although the demonstrations and their subsequent repression occurred in cities throughout the country, the events in Beijing—and especially in Tiananmen Square, historically linked to such other protests as the May Fourth Movement (1919)—came to symbolize the entire incident.

Emergence and spread of unrest

By the spring of 1989 there was growing sentiment among university students and others in China for political and economic reform. The country had experienced a decade of remarkable economic growth and liberalization, and many Chinese had been exposed to foreign ideas and standards of living. In addition, although the economic advances in China had brought new prosperity to many citizens, it was accompanied by price inflation and opportunities for corruption by government officials. In the mid-1980s the central government had encouraged some people (notably scientists and intellectuals) to assume a more active political role, but student-led demonstrations calling for more individual rights and freedoms in late 1986 and early 1987 caused hard-liners in the government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to suppress what they termed “bourgeois liberalism.” One casualty of this tougher stance was Hu Yaobang, who had been the CCP general secretary since 1980 and who had encouraged democratic reforms; in January 1987 he was forced to resign his post.

The catalyst for the chain of events in the spring of 1989 was the death of Hu in mid-April; Hu was transformed into a martyr for the cause of political liberalization. On the day of his funeral (April 22), tens of thousands of students gathered in Tiananmen Square demanding democratic and other reforms. For the next several weeks, students in crowds of varying sizes—eventually joined by a wide variety of individuals seeking political, social, and economic reforms—gathered in the square. The initial government response was to issue stern warnings but take no action against the mounting crowds in the square. Similar demonstrations rose up in a number of other Chinese cities, notably Shanghai, Nanjing, Xi'an, Changsha, and Chengdu. However, the principal outside media coverage was in Beijing, in part because a large number of Western journalists had gathered there to report on the visit to China by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in mid-May. Shortly after his arrival, a demonstration in Tiananmen Square drew some one million participants and was widely broadcast overseas.

Meanwhile, an intense debate ensued among government and party officials on how to handle the mounting protests. Moderates, such as Zhao Ziyang (Hu Yaobang's successor as party general secretary), advocated negotiating with the demonstrators and offering concessions. However, they were overruled by hard-liners led by Chinese premier Li Peng and supported by paramount elder statesman Deng Xiaoping, who, fearing anarchy, insisted on forcibly suppressing the protests.

During the last two weeks of May, martial law was declared in Beijing, and army troops were stationed around the city. However, an attempt by the troops to reach Tiananmen Square was thwarted when Beijing citizens flooded the streets and blocked their way. Protesters remained in large numbers in Tiananmen Square, centring themselves around a plaster statue called “Goddess of Democracy,” near the northern end of the square. Western journalists also maintained a presence there, often providing live coverage of the events.

Crackdown and aftermath

By the beginning of June, the government was ready to act again. On the night of June 3–4, tanks and heavily armed troops advanced toward Tiananmen Square, opening fire on or crushing those who again tried to block their way. Once the soldiers reached the square, a number of the few thousand remaining demonstrators there chose to leave rather than face a continuation of the confrontation. By morning the area had been cleared of protesters, though sporadic shootings occurred throughout the day. The military also moved in forcibly against protesters in several other Chinese cities,

including Chengdu, but in Shanghai the mayor, Zhu Rongji (later to become the premier of China), was able to negotiate a peaceful settlement. By June 5 the military had secured complete control, though during the day there was a notable, widely reported incident involving a lone protester momentarily facing down a column of tanks as it advanced on him near the square.

In the aftermath of the crackdown, the United States instituted economic and diplomatic sanctions for a time, and many other foreign governments criticized China's handling of the protesters. The Western media quickly labeled the events of June 3–4 a "massacre." The Chinese government arrested thousands of suspected dissidents; many of them received prison sentences of varying lengths of time, and a number were executed. However, several dissident leaders managed to escape from China and sought refuge in the West, notably Wu'er Kaixi. The disgraced Zhao Ziyang was soon replaced as party general secretary by Jiang Zemin and put under house arrest.

From the outset of the incident, the Chinese government's official stance was to downplay its significance, labeling the protesters "counterrevolutionaries" and minimizing the extent of the military's actions on June 3–4. The government's count of those killed was 241 (including soldiers), with some 7,000 wounded; most other estimates have put the death toll much higher. In the years since the incident, the government generally has attempted to suppress references to it. Public commemoration of the incident is officially banned. However, the residents of Hong Kong have held an annual vigil on the anniversary of the crackdown, even after Hong Kong reverted to Chinese administration.

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