Hsiu-chuan Lee

Writing, History, and Music in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

A Conversation with Madeleine Thien

The award-winning Asian Canadian writer Madeleine Thien (1974-) has gained increasing critical acclaim. This interview focuses on her most recent novel, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), but the discussions extend to her other work—*Simple Recipes* (2001), *Certainty* (2006), and *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011). An epic novel that spans China's tumultuous modern history from the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Land Reform, and the Cultural Revolution, to the 1989 Tiananmen Movement and its aftermath, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* explores modern Chinese histories via the form of creative writing. Since the novel was inspired by Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and at its core is the family saga of three classical musicians whose lives crossed at the Shanghai Conservatory, the interview probes particularly the interactions between music, writing, and the representation of histories.

In the first section Thien dwells on creative writing's mediating role in historical representation and comments on her relationship with characters and readers. The second section discusses the inspiring role of music and the meaning of music, silence, and mathematics in politics and for individual characters. The third section deliberates on the motif of "the Book of Records" and the implications of taking "compiling" and "copying" as creative forms. Thien turns in the last section to the connection between June Fourth and the Cultural Revolution. She also compares her writing with Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* (2008) and discusses writing as a way to connect generations.

The conversation took place at Milk and Honey Cafe at 1119 Newkirk Ave, Brooklyn, New York, on Feb. 21, 2018. The transcript has been read and confirmed by Thien.

History, Memory, and Creative Writing

Hsiu-chuan Lee: In your 2015 essay in *The Guardian*, which protested against the closing down of the MFA program in creative writing at City University of Hong Kong, you stated: "For writers, literature is a carrier of history." Could you say more about the relationship between creative writing and history?

Madeleine Thien: I probably was thinking about Hong Kong itself, and about the books I was trying to write. Given the scale of the catastrophe in Cambodia, there have been few fictional works about the genocide though there are extraordinary non-fiction works and memoirs. Maybe the work of fiction is in part to get in between what history can tell us, the mechanisms that history shows us. It writes the shadow part of history. In *Dogs at the Perimeter* [hereafter *Dogs*], for example, I knew that it would have been almost impossible for someone to take the route that Janie takes out of Cambodia during the years of 1976 and 1977. I wanted to write what might have been possible in the life of one person—*if only* the escape had been possible. Whether someone in Janie's circumstances, who has lost her parents and will lose her brother, would have survived those years is an enormous question mark. So in some way the novel explores how, in such a shadow, a life might have been lived if history had allowed this life to continue. In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* [hereafter *Do Not Say*], I wanted to see what was being written inside silences, what was in the unwritten music and the lost musicians—things that couldn't come into being but maybe there was still a shadow of them. That the writing of history might also contain this shadow.

HL: What's it like to work in between what has been known in history and the freedom given by fiction and characters?

MT: I think you live from moment to moment with the characters. It's a strange process. As the writer, you know what's going to happen politically or historically as the years progress, but the characters live moment to moment and react to each moment as we all do—unable to perceive what's around the corner. When we read history, we have this feeling of inevitability. But fiction is different. History knows how things are going to turn out, but for individuals, nothing is inevitable. This is a strange contradiction.

HL: You also said, in *The Guardian* essay, that "In Chinese, the word remembrance, jì yì, is a pun that can be heard two ways, 記憶 (to recall, record) and 技藝 (art)." Could you comment upon the idea of memory as an artistic mediation of the past?

MT: I wondered how, or if, the recording—or refashioning or writing into art—of characters' memories would give these memories temporary refuge. Memories

and histories are vulnerable: vulnerable to censorship, removal, erasure, disbelief. But as art they have their own house, their own parameters. The symphony that Sparrow writes has its own entryway; it exists in a different kind of space. In pulling different things together to make art, you create another holding place before memory flickers away.

HL: Do you agree that one important goal of creative writing is to write about something that didn't happen but might happen in history?

MT: This is what I did in *Dogs*, when I wanted to find an escape for Janie. But I also wonder, is it really possible for us to imagine something that didn't happen? I think that history contains all; everything is buried somewhere. It's almost like the camera of history is moving too quickly and we want to make it slow down for us so that we might look somewhere we didn't look before. It's the same panorama we are looking at. It's just that we're looking for something else in there.

HL: You did serious research before you wrote. I can sense a strong appeal to the historical real in your work.

MT: I tried not to take liberty with histories. The one [i.e., imagining an escape route for Janie] in *Dogs* was the biggest I took, but otherwise I was very exact about what was happening with the Khmer Rouge politically, with policy, with movement of people, with the specific way genocide was carried out. For me it was very important not to tamper with the historical record because this is a genocide in which there exists documentation and in which the terrible loss of life, the waste of life, was planned.

HL: Have you ever, in the process of your writing, entered any point of history where you were not quite sure about what happened?

MT: Sometimes you don't know the degree of what happened, and sometimes you don't know the specificities of a particular place. You know the larger picture but not the details. While writing *Certainty* I was researching my father's hometown in Malaysia. I found a great deal of information about the Australian and British soldiers who died in the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps but almost no documentation of local lives. It was an empty space in the historical record. And when I asked my family or interviewed my uncles, I understood they couldn't dwell on those details; mostly when they talked about the past they cupped it away in a few sentences (like *we were hungry* or *we did this or that*) and wouldn't or couldn't go into the details of that time. Emotionally they couldn't.

HL: Does imagination step in for those empty spaces?

MT: Yes, but the writer also has to let go of a lot of preconceived ideas. Maybe

one of the hardest things is to *not* project, as much as humanly possible, what you assume or think you know onto the characters. When writing about Cambodia and China, many people never thought that, within five years, their society could become something almost unimaginable. None of us would ever expect that totalitarianism would descend upon us. I think for a long time I've been interested in what is happening—within individual hearts and minds and in the social climate—as totalitarianism is taking root. What is it that we keep missing about ourselves? What causes people to rush headlong towards ideology? What happens when they realize that the freedoms they took for granted begin to feel, bit by bit, out of reach?

HL: Instead of writing about the autobiographical, you've insisted on writing fiction and using writing to explore others. Why are "others" so important?

MT: The intimate world I was surrounded with, my family and particularly my parents, sometimes felt caught between languages. I know my parents sometimes felt inadequate to the place they lived in. I think that growing up and seeing my parents try to live with dignity left a big mark on me. I want to value that they have knowledge of different worlds; maybe I also write against the undervaluing of that knowledge.

HL: What is then the relationship between you and your characters? Do you feel sympathetic for them?

MT: They have given me more than I could ever put into a book or what I could express. When my first book came out, my mom read it and said that it made her feel less alone; it made her feel that I understood what she went through in those hard years when I was a child and the family was struggling. When I was writing *Dogs* and *Do Not Say*, I wanted to think deeply about what it is to live the aftermath. The books are not there to set the record right or to write the history; they are about experiences that implicate all of us. Their history is also our history. The history of the Cambodian genocide is also American history, and is inextricable from the repercussions of American policies and decisions. We need to look at it, think about it, mourn it, be angry about it, and at least live in it for a little while.

HL: Are the victims of the historical events among your intended readers?

MT: Yes. I think a lot about what it would feel like to pick up a book like mine and feel that your life and history has been misrepresented, has been made superficial or has been skewed into something else—that is what I really don't want. I think a book shouldn't be afraid of its readers, no matter how close or how far they are from the historical or contemporary reality of the novel. I think that [a concern like this] isn't just an ethical or moral question;

it's a literary failure when people who have lived something close to this experience do not recognize any part of themselves in it; it's a failure of the art, a failure of imagination.

HL: Some readers might expect to see images of an author in that author's characters. But in your case, characters that appear to be like you at first glance usually turn out to be very different from you. One exception is the protagonist in "A Map of the City"—the last story in *Simple Recipes*. This character shares similarities with you.

MT: Yes, and I think it was the hardest to write. It is hard to see yourself well. And if you are very self-critical, you may turn that onto your characters, and that's not a good thing. You won't give them the kind of space you would give another character.

HL: How would you describe your relationship with your characters? Are they subjects of your study?

MT: No. They are like friends. And like friends, they don't tell you everything. There are some things they don't know, some things you don't ask them, and some things they might tell you while knowing that you have understood it as something else.

HL: Do you mean that you and your characters converse and figure out a story together?

MT: I think so. But mostly they are around me. Even now I can feel Sparrow sitting over there at the corner, listening, or Big Mother Knife will be stomping off in a second. It's not that I feel that they are inside me or jostling inside my brain, but that they are around us, thinking their own thoughts, knowing much more than I've known, much more about the things that they carry in the novel. And they also let me know: "you can do it," "you won't let us down."

Music, Silence, and Mathematics

HL: You taught creative writing at City University of Hong Kong between 2010 and 2015. Did you write *Do Not Say* mostly in Hong Kong?

MT: During those years I went to Hong Kong maybe three times a year, each time for a few weeks. The rest of the teaching was one-on-one mentorship and could be done through Skype, email, or telephone. I was sometimes in Germany, sometimes in the US, sometimes in Canada, in Singapore for six months, and in China for probably six to seven months. My boyfriend had a fellowship in Berlin so we lived there for a year. Berlin was a good place for me to work in the library and research Western classical music.

HL: Did the musical part of the novel develop from your stay in Germany?

MT: I don't know. It gets all interconnected. I started listening to Glenn Gould's recording of the *Goldberg Variations* in Berlin, but I don't know what triggered what. But Berlin was definitely a good place to think about Bach and classical music; libraries there are also vast with a good collection of Chinese literature translated into English. What I had trouble finding in Canada was easy to find in Germany.

HL: Where did you go in China for research?

MT: My base was Shanghai. And from Shanghai I travelled to different places such as Guangxi (廣西) and then to the northwest Gansu (甘肅), but the long period of intense writing was done in Shanghai.

HL: Did you write in the Shanghai Conservatory?

MT: No. But I spent a lot of time there. I walked around and drifted through the buildings, hallways, the practice rooms. The architecture has changed quite a bit since the 1960s but it has this feeling to it, and it's still in the same location. There is a little museum with the conservatory's history. It's a little bit hidden. It has a room specifically about the Cultural Revolution and the musicians who lost their lives.

HL: Is the story of He Luting (賀綠汀) your starting point to conceive *Do Not Say*?

MT: Not really. He was stuck in my mind, but what really interested me was why abstract art forms such as music could be so dangerous. I understood that words can be dangerous. I understood the terrible logic of persecuting writers. Poetry, literature, stories live inside people and put words to rage or beauty and of course to revolutionary desires.

HL: But classical music could be dangerous less because of its abstract form than because to some people it represents Western civilization and promotes Western cultural values.

MT: Yes. But there is also the power of music itself and the artist's desire to create new forms. A government's fear of art is also an acknowledgement of its power, how it can shape desires, shape us, and that it gets inside us in a way that is very difficult for any outside source to control. So on the one hand, music could be representative of a bourgeois sensibility—it could come from a certain class or social order, but at the same time a Beethoven symphony is also a powerful and uncontrollable experience that might show you something, or even expose some imperfections, of our world. That's a very interesting power. It's fascinating to wonder how music is internalized, how it might reveal something about the reality of our life.

HL: Despite this power of music, Mao Zedong's symphony was to convert music to nationalism.

MT: Yes, they had the orchestra and did believe that one could take Western instruments and Western classical music forms and use them to express Chinese selfhood. Music was taken as a tool because in revolutionary times *everything* must serve as a tool. It was considered something that was powerful and therefore something that had to be controlled. During the Cultural Revolution, the Party was very strict about what the orchestra could and couldn't play.

HL: But the musicians in *Do Not Say* still steal some freedom from the music.

MT: Yes, perhaps because one never knows where the music will go. I probably listened to *Goldberg Variations* before in my life, but I can't pinpoint the moment when I listened to it and I suddenly heard it, really heard it in the configuration of my life, my mind, and my feelings, and that intersection with the music at that particular moment led to this book. It's not an understatement to say that *Goldberg Variations* created this book. But why? And how? It seems to me that music has a truth or some form of understanding.

HL: Edward Said related the power of music to its "silence," by which he referred not to the victimized side of silence as being deprived of voice but to the signifying uncertainty of music.[1] "Silence" is a recurring motif in *Do Not Say*. Could you comment on the effects of silence in the novel?

MT: Silence in this novel isn't all negative. There is a silencing or censoring part; and there is also a silence, a space, in which you can think and question. I associate that kind of silence with privacy, private life, a life of the mind, which is very different from the public life which in its most totalitarian form is all volume, all performance, all fitting your words into the accepted structure. When Sparrow imagines that he sees Zhuli, he tells her that the only life is the one in your mind. Zhuli also tries to take refuge in silence when she goes through the denunciation meetings. It's the silence that signals her ending, her death, but she walks towards it as if towards a refuge. For her, at that moment, the silence doesn't need to be one thing or the other. It is what it is.

HL: In the talk "The Field of Sound," which you gave at the Summer Institute in Asian American Studies (SIAAS) in Taiwan,[2] did you mean to say that the opposite side of sound is *not* silence?

MT: That's right. A passage in the essay is about the different kinds of silence. One is where you *choose* not to speak, and one is about solitude, space, or tranquility—all those textures of silence. In a famous description of

Shostakovich denouncing another musician, one observer said that keeping silent would have been the sign of courage. Silence in this context is about not accepting the parameters and not accepting the conditions: refusing to denounce another human being. It could be the most courageous thing. Also, one reason for Sparrow to be able to produce such a true work at the end of his life is partly because he has lived in silence for so long, but it was a silence in which he still hears everything—such as the factories and the loudspeakers, the voices, machines, wind and air, the cadence of life—as music. He understands that music is much more than what he understood it to be when he was younger.

HL: Sparrow has been against the music with titles. When he finally creates music with a title—"The Sun Shines on the People's Square," he argues that the "square" refers not only to Tiananmen Square but also to the various "squares" he has experienced through life. It seems that you want to combine the abstract form of music with something concrete in Sparrow's life. Does the power of music come from this combination?

MT: If we live in a time of political orthodoxies, when there is a political desire to control our private thoughts and desires, maybe the abstract form offers freedom. In the case of Sparrow, abstract art allows different things to be combined. And the combination for him is not only about music, but all those squares or pieces from which he tried to build a life. Each square is part of an ongoing, recurring, emerging shape. His square is so different from creating a brand new human or a brand new Tiananmen Square that is going to hold everything in a social utopia. For Sparrow, the motion towards the square keeps repeating to create abstract forms, bringing different things into contact with each other. His music is brought to life by what he lived, what he saw, and how he pieced them together. The form gives rise to other forms. It's generative. A generative square that keeps shifting as opposed to a solidly defined square which closes around life.

HL: Is Sparrow's philosophy of creation also your philosophy?

MT: Only in the sense that I probably didn't have it until I met Sparrow. I tried to think about how Sparrow would think of it. My own experiences would never have let me have that formulation.

HL: How about Zhuli's idea of having classical musicians (such as Prokofiev and Bach) occupy the spaces of national symbols (such as the Party and Chairman Mao)? Do you also share that idea?

MT: I like Zhuli's idea when she talks about everything as part of an organic structure. For me, she is the most heartbreaking character because she

knows so much but she doesn't have the opportunity to live out how her ideas would grow. Zhuli has a clarity that the other characters don't have. For a long time, Sparrow thinks that he could find a way to remain himself through all the political oppression, but Zhuli knows that this isn't possible.

HL: Does Zhuli know more than other characters because of her family background?

MT: Exactly. Sparrow doesn't think that things could be overturned to that degree but Zhuli knows that everything can change in a moment. And she knows it doesn't matter, not really, what your class background is or what you did or didn't do or what you saw or didn't think. Someone can be made an enemy of the people overnight.

HL: Why did you make Zhuli die so early?

MT: I didn't. When I think through the choices she would make, or the choices she thought were available to her and the level of violence against her, I think that she couldn't accept living on. She is, in temperament, closer to the musicians who took their lives at the Shanghai Conservatory. Such a purity in their love for music—a purity and integrity they couldn't reconcile with the times in which they were living. Zhuli just wouldn't compromise with that kind of degradation, especially the humiliation to women. Sparrow and Kai compromise music: Kai makes music he doesn't believe in and Sparrow doesn't make music at all. But Zhuli couldn't do either of those things.

HL: Did you create Ai-ming as a continuation of Zhuli?

MT: Ai-ming also can't accept certain kinds of hypocrisy. Realistically, she could actually just go on with her life in China after the 1989 demonstrations. She probably would get into Beijing University. I don't know if I consciously created her as a continuation but it seems that this is what she is. And in a way Zhuli and Ai-ming make their choices because of Sparrow. When they see the person they love so much denying so much about himself, they won't relent in their own choices. Were Sparrow a different person, Ai-ming would probably be a different daughter.

HL: When you wrote *Do Not Say*, did you have in mind the increasing popularity of classical music in China?

MT: Not really while I was writing. In my research, I was very interested in Chinese composers who came up in the 1980s. I was interested in what they were thinking and doing. And definitely, when you're at the Shanghai Conservatory, you're surrounded by a younger generation. And when you attend concerts in Shanghai, they're packed with young people and enthusiastic audiences. The concert halls are stunningly full. This phenomenon was at the back of my head. Maybe it reinforced for me

the belief that taking music into yourself, performing music, loving music, is an instinctive and natural expression everywhere. It could be classical music and it could be other music. Music travels. It has this ability then and now.

HL: But classical music in China was also a legacy of missionaries, a tool of imperialism. After the Cultural Revolution, the arrival of renowned musicians such as Isaac Stern and Yehudi Menuhin then made classical music a tool that symbolically bridged China to the modern world.

MT: That's true. But I also think there are many [Chinese] composers who are in real kinship with composers like Tchaikovsky and Beethoven, though less so with Bach. I don't find it surprising that Beethoven speaks to the Chinese society. He was re-envisioning musical form and the Chinese musicians in the 1980s were living in the aftermath of revolution. I also have this feeling that music has a will to move. Music moves to where it's going to be heard. You could almost say that Western classical music is moving away from the Western world where audiences are in decline. It's moving to places where other people hear and feel it. And when people in China stop hearing and feeling it, it will go somewhere else. Same with traditional forms of music. Music almost has its own migration patterns.

HL: Music seems to have the power to escape any confinement or appropriation.

MT: Yes, it's like music has its own DNA and its own desire. It seems to have the power to move in a way that is much more difficult for literature. Literature has to be translated. Literature carries the norms and syntax of its time. Right now, for example, we are less willing to give up our narrative power to an omniscient narrator; we seem to prefer the first-person narrator; we prefer that level of intimacy and subjectivity. Literature is very marked by its era. Music is also marked, of course, but a phrase of music can be picked up by anyone anywhere and re-formulated into something else.

HL: How about the connection between mathematics and music? In *Dogs*, you also wrote passages about brain science. Are you interested in science?

MT: I love science. Up to the age of sixteen, math was effortless for me. I thought I could understand everything about numbers but then, one day, it just stopped. Even so, I still find mathematics fascinating. It's another form of describing the world. It signals a different kind of reality and numbers have another shape and depth.

HL: In *Do Not Say*, Marie initially tries to escape her family history through the abstractness of mathematics, but mathematics instead offers her a way to access her past.

MT: That's right. Marie is gifted in numbers; she is such a good mathematician that she hears and experiences it much like the way Sparrow understands the world through music. For her, mathematics is a world. It's multi-dimensional and she lives inside it. And maybe she is able to tell these stories because mathematics gives her a feeling of freedom. It gives her the kind of solidity that music gives Sparrow.

HL: Is "zero" important in *Do Not Say* because it's the most abstract concept, the most empty number?

MT: Yes, it is. And it's also the most stable one. I was looking at ideas of the X and Y graph, and the idea that everything depends on zero, everything is measured out from zero in all directions. To be minus five you've got to know where zero is and vice versa. So you can almost say that it's the only point that is real in a sense. In *Do Not Say*, everything is so dependent on other things, forward and backward in time. In some way you can't know any of these characters until you know the ones beside them. Everyone's identity is so dependent on each other. When Marie tells the story, the story that is partially missing is her own father's story. Her way of telling his story is to tell the stories of all the people he loved, betrayed, and tried to save. He exists through them.

"Copying" and "Compiling" as Creative Forms

HL: You mentioned elsewhere that *Do Not Say* was inspired by *The Tiananmen Papers* («天安門文件»; 2001).[3] In your novel, characters like Wen the Dreamer or Marie also engage in tasks of copying and compiling. Do you take "copying" and "compiling" as forms of artistic creation?

MT: I conceived "compiling" and "copying" separately. Wen the Dreamer is a copier. He copies in the Book of Records. Marie and Ai-ming are closer to compilers who put pieces and bits together. Copying is an art. You try to write in a style of the other, but your own voice is inextricably present (in this case, in Wen the Dreamer's calligraphy). A copy is more than a copy, and is a meeting of the copier and the originator (who may also have copied). And compilers are those who carry things—almost physically carry them. They literally gather up these bits and pieces, take on the weight, the burden, and carry them from place to place until they exhaust themselves and hope that someone else will pick up those things and keep carrying them. It's interesting, though, that Marie is both, because she gathers all the pieces and also writes new ones.

HL: I wonder how these ideas about "compiling" and "copying" might change our conception of subjectivity in literary creation. If a writer is understood as a

compiler or a copier, writing is to merge oneself into a collectivity. In *Do Not Say*, individual subjectivity seems to give way to kinship.

MT: Yes. It could be that I have some cynicism about the originality and individuality of one author. I think some of the greatest art happens when writers open themselves up to everything that they are not, and allow all those things to play again in a new configuration.

HL: Did you think this way when you started your writing career? Or have you acquired this along the way?

MT: There's a change, maybe in response to me thinking about the art being created now. The things we call original always seem to me to be the children of other things. And maybe the characters in my novel showed me this way of thinking.

HL: I have the feeling that individuality is more emphasized in characters like Janie and Hiroji in *Dogs* than in characters in *Do Not Say*, where characters are happy to merge with others. Big Mother Knife, for example, imagines her body parts as representations of her family members.

MT: This is true. It's also due to the historical conditions in which these characters found themselves. For Janie and Hiroji, it's an atomization. During the Khmer Rouge years, no one could save another person. The brutality of the particular war and genocide they lived through split each person from another. This also happened in China, but in waves over several decades. In *Dogs*, I was also looking for kinship. The two books are in conversation with each other. In some way they're asking how we might choose each time—because mechanisms of violence are not going away. They come back again and again in related forms. The difficult knots at the centre of these books are: how does one choose, how does one live, how does one create and re-create, and how does one *not* become atomized because honestly, it makes perfect sense that, after what they lived through, they would lose faith in other human beings.

HL: In *Do Not Say*, the characters are musicians, and "individuality" or "originality" seems to be problematized in musical performance as performers usually play with each other and on others' work.

MT: Yes. But don't you think that it's strange that in *Do Not Say*—where kinship and the blurring of lines is so important—the characters are actually more defined and individual than any of the characters in my other books? With so much communality and their embrace of certain blurred lines, they actually become clearer of who they are.

HL: Could you explain the mixed ways of naming in *Do Not Say*: some characters are named with pinyin while others are given nicknames like "Sparrow"?

MT: I know this is not a good answer, but I went by instinct—whether the name fits the characters and whether I could visualize the name in pinyin or in transliteration. Sometimes I wanted the image right away, like "Sparrow," "Big Mother Knife," and so on, but for others it was the poetics of the name, the sound. It was a juggling act. If every character was named with pinyin, it would be difficult for some readers because the names mean nothing to them and bring no images to their mind. Also, Marie tells the story. She lives between worlds and she would have access to both systems. She would, on the one hand, be able to see the instant image of "Big Mother Knife" even if she only sees the pinyin, and vice versa. So in some way this [mixture] comes from the fact that Marie is a compiler; she draws from both ways.

HL: How about the three images included in *Do Not Say*?[4] Are there reasons behind the choice of each image?

MT: The short answer is that they're all in Marie's section, and they're parts of her work as a compiler. She's putting together different bits and pieces; some of them would be the music and some of them would be archival images. What I wanted was a sense of the reality of her attempted documentation. The first two images were taken in the places where Marie was in that moment of compiling. The last image is such an iconic image. Such a simple image but it triggered the whole movement, the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. All these images are part of Marie's compiling and documentation. It's interesting that you ask this question, because the German publisher very much insisted not to have the images. They didn't think that the images added meaning and I didn't fight them. It's funny that with writing you do certain things by instinct, by your sense of the whole, and of the totality of the ideas you're weaving together.

June Fourth and the Issue of Generations

HL: You said that, when you first conceived *Do Not Say*, you wanted to write about June Fourth. But the novel doesn't reach June Fourth until the last few chapters. Have you intentionally started from somewhere else before pushing the narrative to its core subject?

MT: That's what happened intellectually, in a way. In practice, when I was writing I realized, a few hundred pages in, that I was still a long way from 1989. I had started in 1990 and 1991, and I knew that I would circle back to 1989, but I didn't expect to take so long. I thought that the path would be more direct. But actually, now that I think about it, this is the most direct path I could have taken. I think you have to go through all those doors, all those

political campaigns, all those turns of fortune and fates, before you can really understand what might have been in people's minds on June Fourth.

HL: One of the sources for the Tiananmen part of *Do Not Say* was Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*.[5] How's your approach to the Tiananmen Square Protests different from Ma's?

MT: I'm a great admirer of Ma Jian. In *Beijing Coma*, he imagined himself into the life of the students; it's a book about the students, who are of a different generation from Ma. He himself left Beijing before June Fourth because his brother had suffered an accident. He thus also writes about the in-between space of remembering, imagining, and creating, but what he wrote in his novel is closer to what he saw and understood first-hand, as a person who knows China intimately. I was inspired by the way he wrote about the students' generation, but I turned the telescope around: his focus is the students and my focus is Sparrow's generation. I wanted to be able to tell Sparrow's story from its beginning to its end. Ma Jian went into the generation that came after him and I entered the generation that came before me. I think these two books are part of each other's worlds, tied together by histories, desires, and impulses that echo and resonate with each other. We usually think about one generation after another, but never get to be pushed back again to an earlier generation like a wave.

HL: *Do Not Say* connects the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square protests. Is this why Sparrow's perspective is so crucial in the novel?

MT: Yes, it's interesting to see how many revolutionary ideas of the young generation were revolutionary ideas of the past. If we could see how much different generations have in common, we might understand why the wave (of social change, of deep and just revolution) never touches the land—why it keeps failing at the last moment. Each generation thinks that it discovers an idea for the first time. It doesn't heed its connection to other generations.

HL: Talking about the connection of generations, I'm intrigued by your interest in writing about your parents' generation. In comparison, you wrote little about your own generation.

MT: Yes, and when I do, they are like Janie, who is about my age. But even when she is of my generation, I'm more interested in looking outside. It's funny that I don't know how else to be—I don't know how else to live my life or my writing life without thinking about my parents.

HL: In addition to writing about your parents, it seems that you also have the tendency to move away from what you are most familiar with, such as your writing about China and Cambodia.

MT: This moving away, writing about China and Cambodia, is a complicated one, because the histories are close to my family, but not my family history at all. My parents have a fragile connection with China because they were both born outside and speak minority dialects. So it's a moving away into the world.

HL: In *Do Not Say*, you offer subtle details on the side of China but reveal little about what Marie and her mother experience in Canada. Do you have any plan to write more about Canada in the future?

MT: Yes, the next book will be closer to me and to my generation. I am taking everything I have learned. I don't think I could have done this three books ago. I guess I had to know more about the world before I could think about my own life.

HL: You mentioned in a previous interview that some publisher suggested to leave off "the last third" (which is on June Fourth) of *Do Not Say* for it to be published in China.[6] How do you think about this suggestion?

MT: It really fits the form of the book—that readers will get only a part and maybe, one day in the future, they'll find another part. Publishing this way would only be okay for me if it was very clear that the rest of the book had been torn out: it has to end in mid-sentence. It has to be very clear that there's much more to this book that you don't have in your hand. And I would hope that one day the other part will be published in China and be available and will find its way into the readers' lives. I would like this. I would love to see the novel published much like the Book of Records, in its different chapters. This is how history comes to us, in bits and pieces out of order. In some way this would be the best way to publish the book, true to its form.

HL: Finally, about the length of the novel. Your works before *Do Not Say* are much shorter. Since your language is poetic and refined, readers tend to read slowly. Given the length of *Do Not Say*, do you expect your readers to read it slowly or do you want them to speed up?

MT: I want both. This is my experience of reading the Russians. I can read Dostoevsky quickly because his plots and psychology are so gripping that I just want to turn the pages. But I can also read Dostoevsky slowly. Many people came up to me saying that they had read *Do Not Say* twice or even three times, or they had read it once and were going to read it again. As a writer that made me happy because it took me five years to write it, and it takes a reader maybe twenty hours to read it. So I don't mind people reading it twice.

HL: I'll definitely read *Do Not Say* more than one time. Thank you very much.

NOTES

1 Said wrote: "Of all the arts . . . , music which depends on and is sound, is the most silent, the most inaccessible to the kind of mimetic meaning we can get for example from a poem, or a novel or film" (262).
2 A revised version of this talk appears under the title "The Act of Listening" in *The Subject(s) of Human Rights: Crises, Violations, and Asian/American Critique* (2019).
3 See Patterson, Polley, and Thien.
4 The three images are (1) "an overpass that crosses a six-lane thoroughfare" in Hong Kong; (2) "a small columbarium" in a cemetery near the Chinese border; and (3) a photo taken on April 22, 1989, featuring three petitioning students on the Tiananmen Square.
5 See Patterson, Polley, and Thien.
6 See Chen.

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