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Study Guide

for

The Clay Marble

by Minfong Ho



New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Minfong Ho



*There is so much, so much beauty and so much pain
in the world around me which I want to write
about—because I want to share it.*

—Minfong Ho

Like many writers, award-winning novelist Minfong Ho writes about the people and places she knows well and cares about. Ho grew up in three different countries in Southeast Asia and became a writer because she wanted readers, especially children, to appreciate the countries of her youth. As a child, Ho was disappointed with many of the picture books about Asian cultures. They were often written by authors who were not from Asia and seldom told the stories of ordinary people. Ho writes:

*Children's books . . . were [usually] about
princes and emperors and/or their elephants,
peacocks, and tigers. . . . This was not the
Asia I knew.*

Ho wanted to write honestly about real people who dealt with real-life situations. Since her decision to become a writer, Ho has written short stories, picture books, and three prize-winning novels.

Minfong Ho was born in 1951 in Rangoon, Burma. Her father, Rih-Hwa, was an economist and her mother, Lienfung, was a chemist and a writer. Ho spent her childhood in Singapore and Thailand and became fluent in three languages: Chinese, Thai, and English.

Ho attended Tungai University in Taiwan before transferring to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In 1973 she received a degree in history and economics from Cornell. While there, she began a short story called “Sing to the Dawn.” Ho didn’t expect many people to read the story. She wrote it mostly because she missed Thailand. Eventually, however, she entered it into a short story contest. Ho won an award and was asked to turn the story into a novel, which was published in 1975. Ho used the money earned from the publication of *Sing to the Dawn* to set up scholarship funds for girls in Thailand.

After graduating from Cornell, Ho returned to Asia and worked as a journalist in Singapore, a teacher at a university in Thailand, a laborer at a plywood factory, and a representative for a trade union. In 1976 Ho married John Value Dennis Jr., a soil scientist, and moved back to Ithaca, New York. There she earned a master’s degree in creative writing from Cornell and worked as a teaching assistant.

In 1980 Ho saw images of Cambodian war refugees on television. She took a leave of absence from her teaching job and went to work as a nutritionist and relief worker for Catholic Relief Services on the Thai-Cambodian border. This experience helped her to write *The Clay Marble* (1991).

Ho continues to write books for children and young adults. She has presented workshops in middle schools and high schools and has won countless awards for her writing.

Introducing the Novel

Hopefully, young readers in America will understand better, through some of my stories, the youth around me in Asia.

—Minfong Ho

As this quote shows, Minfong Ho has a purpose in writing about life in Southeast Asia. She wants to increase understanding between cultures and provide realistic descriptions of what life is like for people in different countries. Much of her fiction features young people as the **protagonists**, or main characters. Although these protagonists live in Asia, they have qualities to which young people all over the world can relate.

The protagonists in *The Clay Marble* are two Cambodian girls: Dara, who is twelve, and Jantu, who is thirteen. Both the girls and their families are caught in the middle of the warfare that is ravaging their country. Through the experiences of these characters, the author shows readers what life is like for innocent people living in an area torn apart by war.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Clay Marble takes place in the early 1980s, mainly in an area on the border between Cambodia and Thailand. This was the location of several crowded Cambodian refugee camps. At this time, life for average Cambodians had long been troubled by violence and unstable political conditions.

In the early 1970s, a man named Lon Nol abolished the monarchy of Cambodia, which was headed by Prince Sihanouk. The country's new government, the Khmer Republic, was supported by the United States.

Meanwhile, an opposing communist group, called the Khmer Rouge, was growing in strength and controlled much of the countryside. During the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge fought with the Vietcong, or Vietnamese communist troops, against the United States. The United States repeatedly bombed Cambodia with many tons of

explosives in places where Vietcong were thought to have military bases.

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge officially took over the country and threw out the Khmer Republic. The country was renamed Democratic Kampuchea. This brutal new government, led by Pol Pot, immediately began executing, or putting to death, any one who disobeyed the new government. Military officers and government officials from the old Khmer Republic were killed. Some educated people, religious leaders, and other people seen as dangerous to the new government were killed or sent to work camps. Thousands tried to escape to Thailand, but one to three million people were killed under the Khmer Rouge.

Democratic Kampuchea, which was supported by the People's Republic of China, began fighting Vietnam, which was supported by the Soviet Union. In 1978 Vietnam invaded Democratic Kampuchea and members of the Khmer Rouge fled to the Thai border.

The Clay Marble takes place during the years immediately following the invasion of the Vietnamese. Cambodia was divided by warring groups. One group was made up of the surviving members of the Khmer Rouge. Another group was called the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, a non-communist group. The third group, also noncommunist, was headed by the former prince of Cambodia and called The National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia. These groups fought against each other as well as against the Vietnamese government.

During this transition period, Vietnam had little control over the lives of average citizens. Many people fled Cambodia, going to refugee camps on the Thai border. Some were fearful that the Khmer Rouge would regain power. Others wanted to gather supplies so that they could rebuild their lives in Cambodia.

Did You Know?

One of ten nations in Southeast Asia, Cambodia is located at the bottom of the Indochinese Peninsula. This peninsula is called Indochinese because it is located between the nations of India and China. Other nations that are part of the Indochinese Peninsula are Burma (today Myanmar), Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, Cambodia, called Kambuja, was the center of a powerful empire occupied by the Khmer people. During this time, King Yasovarman I located his court in what was known as the Angkor region. It was a center of Khmer government, study, and religious activities. It was here that King Suryavarman II, who reigned from 1131 to 1150, built a huge temple known as Angkor Wat. Angkor Wat remains the largest religious building in the world and is often considered to be one of the architectural wonders of the world. The Khmer Empire reached its greatest



power between 1181 and 1215 but then began to decline in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Today 90 percent of Cambodians trace their ancestry to the Khmer people.

Before You Read

The Clay Marble Chapters 1–6

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What do the words *friends* and *family* mean to you? When are friends and family especially important?

Journal

In a journal entry, give your own definitions of the words *friends* and *family*. Then write about a time when a friend or family member was especially important to you.

Setting a Purpose

Read to understand how the narrator's closeness with her family and a special friend helps her to deal with a difficult experience.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In this section, narrator Dara enjoys listening to the stories and folktales that her new friend Jantu tells. Cambodian folktales do not usually tell about noble or mighty heroes. They are often about peasants outsmarting authority figures, animals outsmarting people, or small, clever animals such as monkeys and rabbits outsmarting larger, more powerful animals like crocodiles and elephants. Read Jantu's folktale in this section and identify why it is a typical Cambodian folktale.

Buddhism

In this section, Dara and her mother speak to the Buddha in prayer. The Buddhist religion, which started in India, spread to Cambodia about two thousand years ago. It is based on the teachings of Gautama, who was a prince born in India more than 2,500 years ago. He became known as the Buddha, or Enlightened One. The Buddha taught that all people, through methods of behavior and thinking, could overcome suffering and be enlightened, or gain great understanding of the spiritual world. Buddhism was popular in Cambodia in the sixth and seventh centuries and after 1200. When the Khmer Rouge Communists took over Cambodia in 1975, all forms of religion were condemned. Monks were killed or forced to work as farm laborers, and wats, or monasteries, were destroyed. In the early 1980s, with the Vietnam invasion, Cambodians were free to practice religion again. Today 95 percent of the Cambodian population is Buddhist.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

converge [kən vurj'] v. to come together

curtly [kurt'lē] adv. in a rudely abrupt manner

demurely [di myoor'lē] adv. modestly; shyly

exhort [ig zôrt'] v. to advise; to warn

flourish [flur'ish] n. showy display or gesture

meager [mē'gər] adj. skimpy; lacking substance

relent [ri lent'] v. to relax; to become less harsh

shrapnel [shrap'nəl] n. fragments from bombs or other explosives

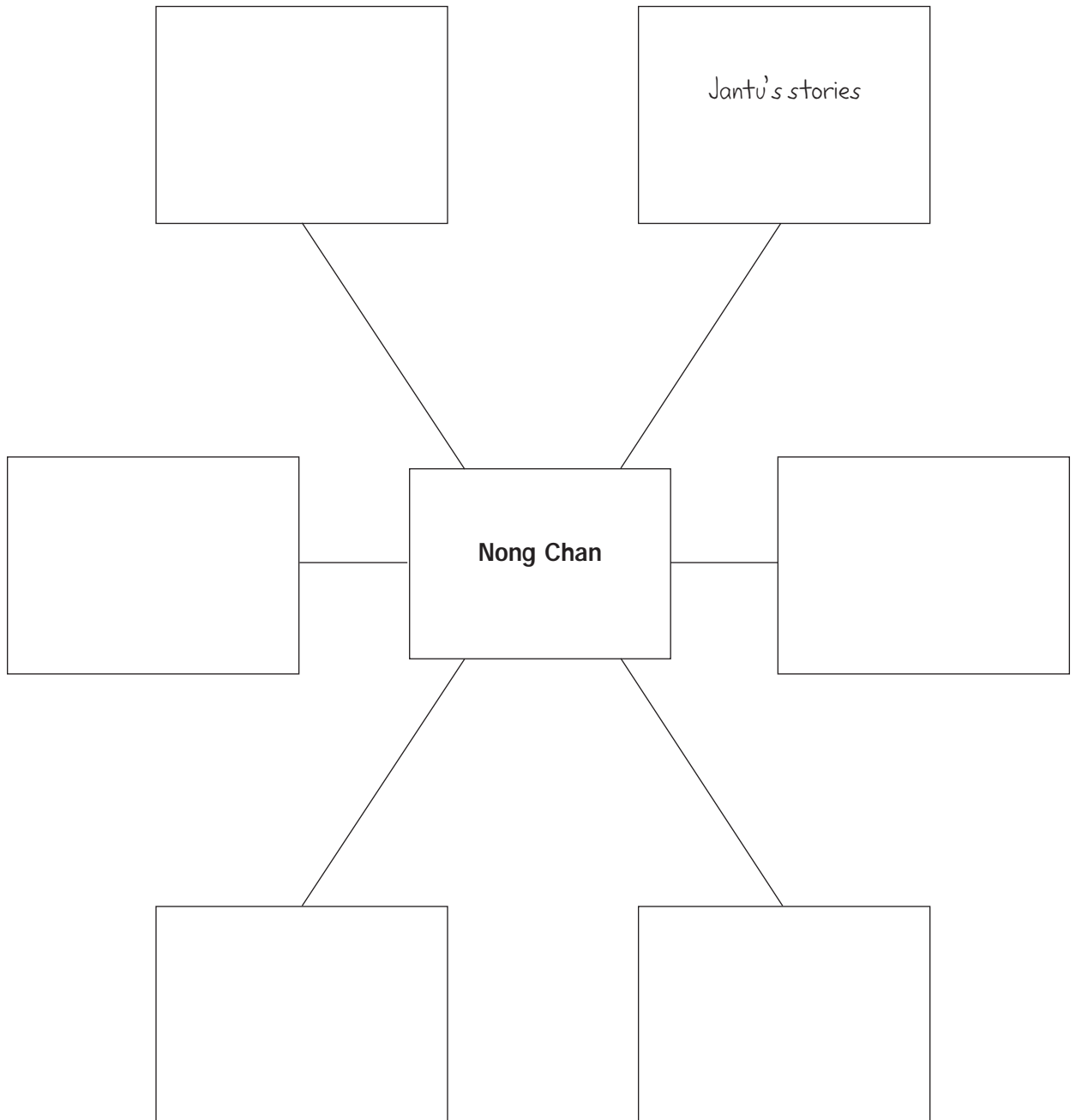
sinewy [sin'ū ē] adj. muscular; strong

spate [spāt] n. sudden outpouring of words or emotions

Active Reading

The Clay Marble Chapters 1–6

In this section, Dara and her family make a temporary home for themselves at Nong Chan, a refugee camp. Nong Chan becomes a safe haven for the family, despite the war and feelings of homesickness. In the web organizer below, note details about people and activities at Nong Chan that lift Dara’s spirits and make her feel hopeful.



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Responding

The Clay Marble Chapters 1–6

Personal Response

What images from Dara’s first days at Nong Chan stay in your mind? Write your thoughts below; then share them with a partner.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why do Dara and her family leave their village in Cambodia? Explain why Nong Chan is such a welcome sight to them.

2. Describe Jantu’s family. Why does Dara find Jantu fascinating?

3. According to Jantu, why are she and Dara no longer part of “real families”? What do Jantu’s clay dolls reveal about the girls’ attitude toward family and their hope for the future?

Responding

The Clay Marble Chapters 1–6

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Food and the feeling of community at Nong Chan lift Dara's spirits but cannot erase her strong feelings of sadness. Why is she sad, and how does the author show this sadness?

5. After reading this section, how do you feel about the fighting in Cambodia? Explain your feelings.

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Relationships

Refer to the definitions of *friends* and *family* you wrote in the **Focus Activity** on page 12. Then write about a friendship or a relationship between family members in this section that illustrates one of your definitions. Explain how the author uses details to help readers understand this relationship.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

To explain the war, Jantu tells Dara a story about a family of deaf men and a crocodile. In your group, talk about what the story means. What does Jantu's telling of the story reveal about her character and her ability to understand situations? Look for other places where Jantu gives Dara advice or helps her to understand something. Do you think Jantu's experiences have played a role in shaping her character and outlook on life? Explain.

Art Connection

In Chapters 1 through 6, Dara tells readers that Jantu's stories are often more than fun—they also express ideas and explain things. Work with a partner to create a picture book that explains or gives a simple lesson about an idea in this section of the novel. Your picture book should use characters and illustrations that are appealing to young children. To begin, think about folktales and lesson tales you read when you were a young child. You might also look for books at the library that are good examples of these types of stories. Then choose your theme and brainstorm ideas for your picture book. Create your book using materials of your choice.



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Before You Read

The Clay Marble Chapters 7–12

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What personal qualities are necessary to achieve a goal despite great hardships?

Share Ideas

With a partner, talk about the qualities that help people overcome hardships. Give examples. You might mention the experiences of famous people or people you know, or the experiences of characters in books or movies. Make a list of the qualities you think are most important.

Setting a Purpose

In this section, notice how Dara overcomes hardships on a difficult journey toward an important goal.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In the next two sections, Dara and Jantu become familiar with medical workers wearing white armbands that bear a red cross. In times of war, workers with the International Red Cross step in to care for the wounded, sick, and homeless. The idea for an organization like the Red Cross came from a Swiss man by the name of Henri Dunant. After witnessing the suffering of thousands of wounded soldiers in northern Italy, he and four others called a conference in 1863 at which the International Committee of the Red Cross was established. This politically neutral committee protects all victims of war, not just soldiers. In 1919, the League of Red Cross Societies was founded to coordinate health and relief services for refugees and, more recently, natural disaster victims. Today almost all nations have a national Red Cross Society.

Characterization

There are many ways in which to learn about the different characters in a book. You can notice how they treat others and how others feel about them; you can pay close attention to what they are thinking, feeling, and saying; and you can pay attention to a writer's direct descriptions of them. For example, in the first section of the novel Dara observes Jantu feeding her brother, saying she was "spoon-feeding him the best parts of the stew, even though I knew she must be hungry, too." This small observation indicates a great deal about Jantu's generous nature. Chapters 7 through 12 of the novel are important to your understanding of Dara as a character. As you read, use some of the above techniques to draw conclusions about her.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

belligerently [bə lij'ər ənt lē] *adv.* in a fighting, hostile manner

flux [fluks] *n.* state of change

insolent [in'sə lənt] *adj.* rude

mobilize [mō'bə liz'] *v.* to prepare for action

sovereignty [sov'rən tē] *n.* supreme power

subdued [səb dōōd'] *adj.* restrained

tarpaulin [tār pō'lin] *n.* piece of durable material used for protecting exposed items

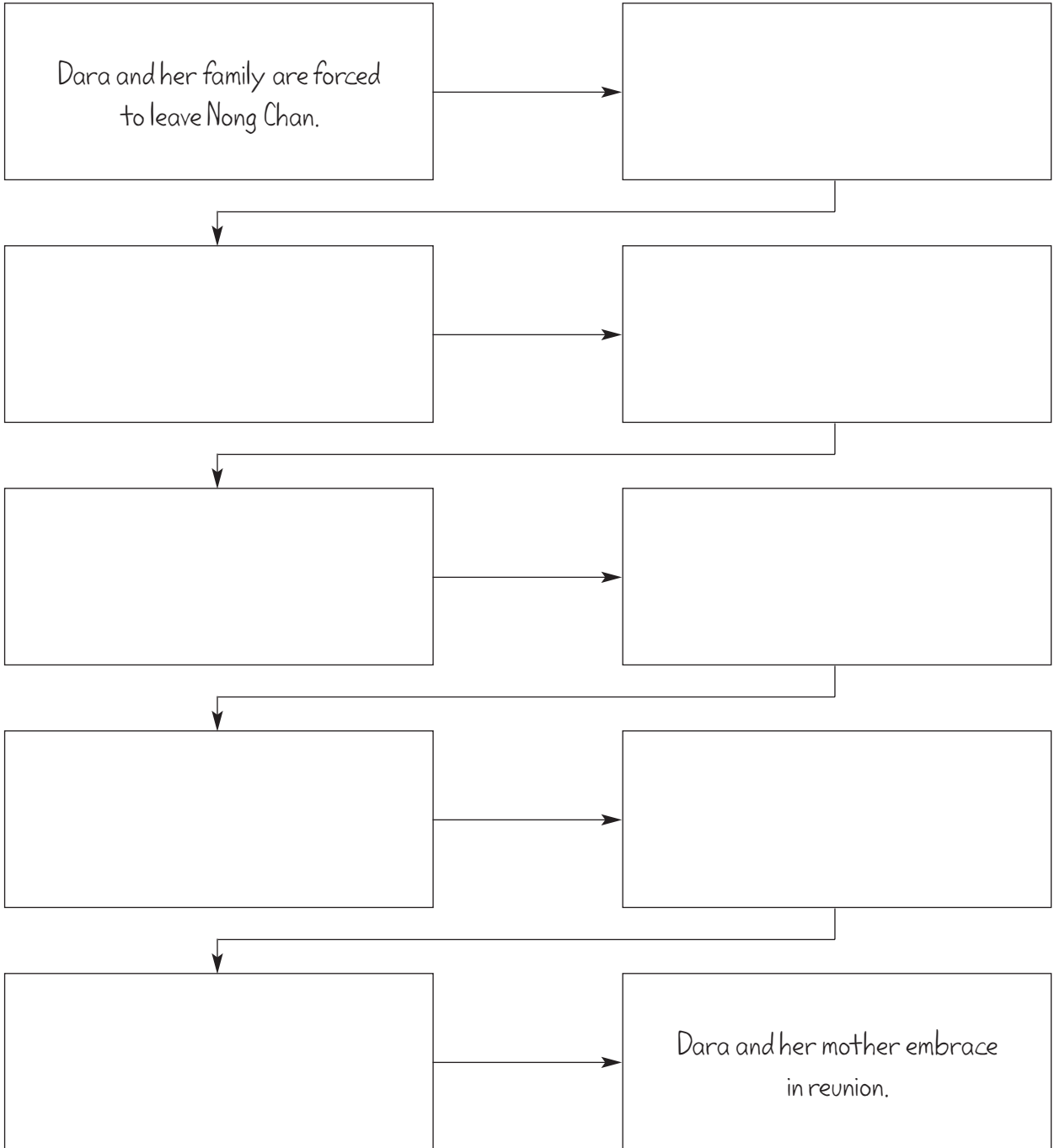
wheedling [hwēd'ling] *adj.* pleading; coaxing; persuading

winnow [win'ō] *v.* to sort; to separate out the useful part of something

Active Reading

The Clay Marble Chapters 7-12

In this section, Dara is forced into a frightening situation that tests her strength. To better understand what Dara goes through in this section, describe briefly, in the boxes below, each of the encounters she has. Use as many boxes as you need.



Responding

The Clay Marble Chapters 7–12

Personal Response

How did you feel about the narrator while reading this section? How did you feel about Chnay?

Review your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 16. Does Dara reveal any of the qualities listed by you and your partner? Give examples.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Explain how Dara and Jantu become separated from their families. How do the girls react to their situation?

2. What important information does Chnay share with Dara when they are at the stone beam? Why do you think Dara feels sorry for Chnay for the first time?

3. Why does Dara ask for a job in the General's kitchen? What character traits does she show in her conversation with the General?

Responding

The Clay Marble Chapters 7–12

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you believe Jantu's clay marble is really magical and is the reason why Dara survives her ordeal and finds her family? Why or why not?

5. In your opinion, does Dara grow or change at all in this section? Explain.

Literature and Writing

Understanding Details

Dara walks back to Nong Chan, hoping to find her family. When she gets there, the camp is deserted. She also finds the toy village, carefully crafted by Jantu, destroyed. Why does Dara try to piece the dolls together? Why does seeing the broken dolls make her cry? Write a short paragraph about how these details relate to Dara's scary, lonely situation.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

At the military base camp, Dara is horrified to learn that rice seed is being eaten instead of saved for planting. She thinks, "No . . . not the rice seed, too. That's meant for us, for the women and children, . . . for our new lives." In your group, discuss why the author includes this scene. Why do you think Dara finds the idea of soldiers eating the rice seed upsetting? What does the seed represent to her? Do you think the author has more respect for the work of the soldier or the work of the rice farmer? Explain your response.

Performing

Working with a partner, do a dramatic reading of a scene from one of the chapters in this section. Consider the following scenes:

- Dara and Jantu at the hospital, when they decide to separate and Jantu gives Dara the clay marble
- Dara and Chnay's conversation at the deserted Nong Chan
- Dara and Chnay being scolded by the cook and General Kung Silor for stealing chicken
- Dara questioning Chnay about his search for her parents and offering him food for his help

Assign different roles to your partner and yourself. In your reading, try to capture the emotion of the scene and the true personality of each character.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Clay Marble Chapters 13–18

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What personal qualities does it take to stand up for what you want or believe?

Quickwrite

Write about a time when you did or did not stand up for what you wanted or believed. Explain the reasons for your actions.

Setting a Purpose

In this section, Dara must try to find the courage to stand up for what she knows is best. Read to find out how she handles her situation.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

When Dara first arrives in Nong Chan, she is comforted by a large plate of fragrant rice. Throughout the family's stay in refugee camps, they talk about one day returning home to Siem Reap with their rice seed to plant a new crop. Rice is a grain grown in fields of water called "rice paddies." It has played an important part in Cambodian life throughout the country's history and has long been one of Cambodia's greatest resources. Most Cambodians eat rice two or three times a day. Traditional Cambodian law considered it a crime to damage a rice plant. In the final section, Dara longs to return to her rice fields, where her family can again be self-sufficient and where there is growth instead of destruction.

Theme

The main ideas expressed in a literary work are called its **themes**. To find a theme, readers can look for images and ideas that seem to repeat themselves throughout the novel. The author's repetition of these elements emphasizes a particular point or idea. Read the last section of this novel carefully to learn more about its themes.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

counter [koun' tər] *v.* to argue

emigrate [em' ə grāt'] *v.* to leave one area for another

maimed [māmd] *adj.* seriously wounded

ominous [om' ə nəs] *adj.* threatening; suggesting evil

retreat [ri trēt'] *v.* to withdraw

reverie [rev' ə r ē] *n.* a dreamy state

sentries [sen' trēz] *n.* guards

stagnant [stag' nənt] *adj.* motionless; still

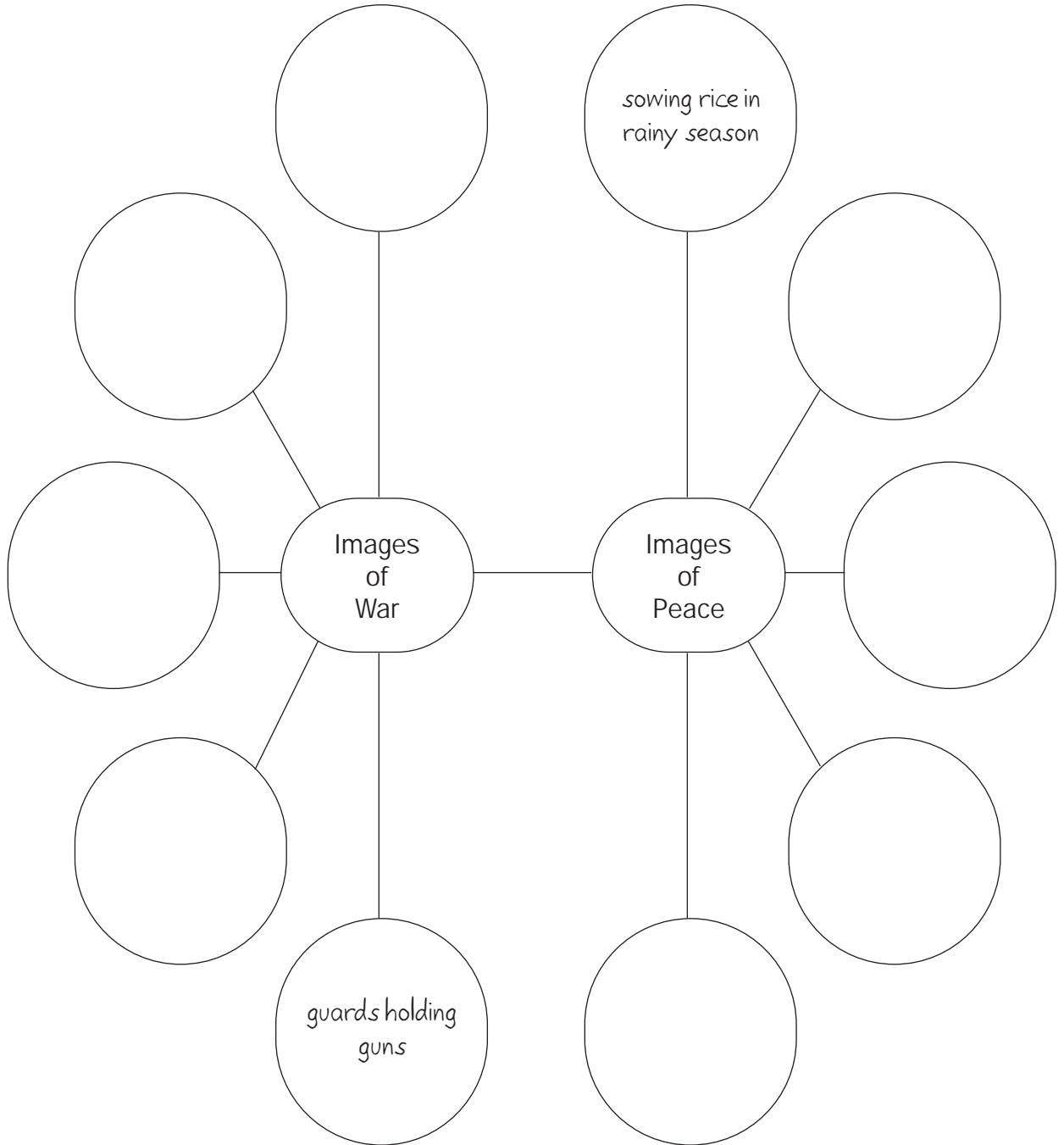
stifle [stī' fəl] *v.* to smother; to hold back

strenuous [stren' ū əs] *adj.* requiring a great deal of strength and energy

Active Reading

The Clay Marble Chapters 13–18

Chapters 13 through 18 contain details and images of life in an area taken over by war. They also contain images related to going home to a peaceful farm. These images help readers to understand Dara’s wish to leave the military camp. In the diagram below, list details that relate to each setting.



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Responding

The Clay Marble Chapters 13–18

Personal Response

What thoughts went through your mind while reading the last section of the novel? Record your ideas below.

Think about your response to the **Focus Activity**. Do you think you would have been able to stand up to the General or to Sarun if you were Dara? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. In what ways has Sarun changed in this section? How do Dara and Nea feel about these changes?

2. Describe the conditions at the hospital where Dara finds Jantu and Baby. Why does Dara feel guilty after she leaves the hospital?

3. What does Dara say when she confronts Sarun? Why, do you think, is she able to stand up to him?

Responding

The Clay Marble Chapters 13–18

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. What does Jantu mean when she tells Dara that she must “make her own magic marble”?

5. Why is Jantu so important to Dara? In your opinion, what is the most important lesson Dara learns from Jantu?

Literature and Writing

Letter to Sarun

In the final section of the novel, Dara has trouble convincing Sarun that the family should return home. Imagine that she decides to put her thoughts on paper. Compose a letter that Dara might write to Sarun to reassure him that leaving behind the military and returning to a life of farming and family is the right choice. Give solid reasons why she believes the fighting is senseless and wrong. Also support her opinions with examples from her life.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

This novel has many contrasting images. In the Afterword of the novel, Dara remembers terrible images of war. These include the lost girl holding a broken doll, suffering and hopelessness at the hospital, guards with guns, and Jantu’s violent death. She also remembers happy images of stories and clay dolls, Jantu’s high spirits, the food truck, and traveling home with oxcarts full of rice seed. Work with your group to plan and create a mural on paper that shows some of the most meaningful images in the novel. Try to have your mural express the meaning of the novel as a whole. Display your murals in the classroom.

Music Connection

In the final section, Jantu repeats a lullaby that she sang in the first section. This short song is peaceful and hopeful. The lullaby is just one of the happy images of Jantu that Dara carries with her into adulthood. Write a short song that Dara might write in honor of Jantu to sing to her own child. The song should show how Dara feels about Jantu. It can also pass on what Jantu taught Dara about making her own magic marble.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Responding

The Clay Marble

Personal Response

Choose a character or event from the novel you feel taught you something new.

What did you learn?

Writing About the Novel

As a character, Dara grows and changes throughout the course of *The Clay Marble*. On a separate sheet of paper, describe some of Dara's feelings and actions at the beginning of the novel. Then describe her feelings and actions at the end of the novel. Explain the ways in which she is different from the person she was when she first arrived at Nong Chan. Then write about specific people and incidents that helped her to change and grow.



Save your work for your portfolio.



from Cambodia

Miriam Greenblatt

Before You Read

Focus Question

How does learning the history of a place help you understand the people who live there?

Background

For most of the first half of the twentieth century, France controlled Cambodia. When Cambodia gained its independence in 1953, Norodom Sihanouk became the ruler. Sihanouk was a Khmer who had been the king of Cambodia since 1941, but he did not have any real power until 1953. Miriam Greenblatt writes about the changes to Cambodia's government since 1953—changes that affected the lives of many Cambodian families like Dara's family in *The Clay Marble*. Greenblatt is a writer and editor who has visited many Asian countries, including Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Responding to the Reading

1. Name three ways Sihanouk tried to make life better for Khmers.

2. Identify two groups of Cambodians who were not satisfied with Sihanouk's rule in 1970. Why were these groups unhappy?

3. **Making Connections** Identify at least one quote from *The Clay Marble* that can help you identify the period in Cambodian history during which the novel is set. Then tell what period that is.

History Connection

Create a graphic organizer to help you understand the history of the government of Cambodia. Draw four boxes. Write one of the following terms in each box: *Sihanouk*, *Khmer Republic*, *Communist Party of Kampuchea*, *People's Republic of Kampuchea*. Find newspaper articles, encyclopedia entries, or Internet sources that give information on each of these subjects. Report any findings of ongoing problems in this region.

from *Children of the River*

Linda Crew

Before You Read

Focus Question

What do you consider to be the most important aspects of your life? How might your answer to this question be different if you lived in another country or during another time period?

Background

Children of the River is the story of a Khmer family that flees from Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge take control of Phnom Penh. This family leaves home about five years before the families in *The Clay Marble*. Unlike Dara's family, the family in this reading does not return home, but eventually comes to the United States. *Children of the River* was inspired by Linda Crew's friendship with Cambodian refugees who work on her Oregon farm.

Responding to the Reading

1. When do Sundara and her family leave Cambodia? How do you know? Why might they have left so much earlier than the families in *The Clay Marble*?

2. What is Sundara's reaction to her classmates' choice of "topics that concerned them most deeply"? What do you think their chosen topics say about them or their lives?

3. How is Moni's reason for leaving Cambodia similar to Sundara's? How is it different?

4. **Making Connections** Dara is filled with excitement and hope for her new beginning in Cambodia. Do you think Sundara was excited to come to the United States? Do you think she is hopeful for her future? Explain your answers.

Learning for Life

Imagine that Sundara is moving to your community and will be attending your high school. With a partner, think of ways that you and your friends can make her feel welcome. Remember that she and her family have left everything they knew and loved in Cambodia. You may want to plan a tour of your community to show her where places like the grocery store, the post office, and the bank are located. Or you may want to research and prepare a typical Cambodian meal for her and her family. Write the details of your plan on a separate sheet of paper, then compare your ideas with others in the class.

from Old World Monkeys

Ann Elwood

Before You Read

Focus Question

If you could have any pet in the world, what would it be?

Background

The monkey guarding Kung Silor's kitchen may be a pet, but guarding the kitchen is its job. This monkey, like many monkeys in Asia, is a working pet. This kitchen guard communicates with Dara and Chnay in human-like ways. In this excerpt from Ann Elwood's *Old World Monkeys* you will learn more about the monkeys in *The Clay Marble*.

Responding to the Reading

1. How are Old World monkeys different from New World monkeys?

2. What features do you find interesting about monkeys? Would you like one as a pet? Why or why not?

3. **Making Connections** Using the information in this reading, explain why you think Dara so easily befriended the monkey in Kung Silor's kitchen.

Creative Writing

Using what you learned about Old World monkeys in this reading, on a separate sheet of paper write a short story with a monkey as the main character.

from Toys Made of Clay

Hannelore Schäl and Ulla Abdalla

Before You Read

Focus Question

Think of a toy that was very special to you when you were a child. Why was it special?

Background

Jantu's clay marbles seem magical to Dara. The clay village is so special that Dara doesn't want to leave it behind. In this reading, the authors give directions for making your own clay toys.

Responding to the Reading

1. Using what you learned in the reading, explain how to attach pieces of clay so they do not fall apart. Do you think that this process makes the toys unbreakable? Explain your answer.

2. What do you think is special about toys that you make yourself or that someone you know makes for you?

3. **Making Connections** In *The Clay Marble*, Jantu creates a whole village out of clay. Why do you suppose she spends so much time making toys? Why do you think she and Dara find so much pleasure in playing with the clay village despite the chaos that is going on around them?

Developing a Plan

Make a rough sketch for something that you would like to fashion out of clay. Pretend that anything you fashion out of clay will become real. What would you make? Why?

The Shaping of *The Clay Marble*

Minfong Ho

Before You Read

Focus Question

What advice would you offer someone who was suffering from depression because of his or her past experience?

Background

While working in the refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border, Minfong Ho did not know that she would later use her experience as the basis for a novel. In fact, it took her many years to begin to write about Cambodia. In this essay, she explains how she finally came to write *The Clay Marble*.

Responding to the Reading

1. What three languages does Minfong Ho speak? How might she have come to learn each one?

2. Describe two ways in which Ho can personally relate to the situation of the Cambodian refugees.

3. **Making Connections** How does the final statement in this essay—“even the strongest and toughest things can do with a bit of help, now and then”—apply both to Ho’s experience and to *The Clay Marble*?

Literature Groups

In your groups, work together to identify similarities and differences between Ho’s descriptions of the refugee camps in the essay and in the novel. Then discuss why she might have chosen to include the descriptions that she did in each piece of writing.