**Written Response to Historical Fiction**

In writing these responses, a summary of the plot of the book is not required. Only mention the details that help you explain the answers to the questions. Included are sample responses to the questions. Please include the title and author in your first sentence.

**Discuss which ongoing or emerging social, political, or economic forces impacted the characters in this book. Explain how these forces constrained or enabled the actions of the characters.**

The novel, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, by Nien Cheng, is set in China on the eve of the Cultural Revolution in China. She faced a forced movement towards communism in the country by its leader, Mao Zedong. He hoped to purify the economic and political systems of China, change China an agricultural society to an industrial power, and secure his own power by eliminating those with education, social standing or influence. His poor governance caused his reforms in industry and agriculture to fail. There was widespread poverty and famine. The poor people were so desperate that they were ready for change, and found Mao to be an inspiring leader. Because they were generally uneducated, the peasants were unaware that his decisions caused most of their pain.

**Describe how important consequences of a character’s choices were determined by the time period and would have been different in today’s society.**

In Nien Cheng’s China, honor for one’s elders was deeply rooted in the culture. Mao turned all this around by inflaming young teens to rebel on his behalf. Few of the mature adults could see the disaster that was coming toward them because of their position as elders. I think today, in the US, most people would be very suspicious and react quickly to teens trying to take over adults in the name of the government. Nein’s quiet courage is very revered in Chinese culture, while a more belligerent response would be more expected in our society.

**Were there ways in which characters banded together with others to solve the problems they faced? Why or why not?**

Although a few people encouraged each other, and Nein, to tell the truth regardless of the consequences, very few people banded together against the government. By the time they recognized the need for such cooperation, the government had too much power and had influence over too many people. No one knew who to trust. Parents could not even trust their children.

**Explain the ethnic, cultural, political and socio-economic standing of the main character(s) in the book.**

Because the main character and author of this book was an educated, upper-middle class woman working for an American Company, she became a target for oppression. She represented what Mao thought was a Western, and therefore, impure influence on Chinese society. She was accused of being a spy. However, it was her education, strength and virtue that allowed her to emerge victorious from her oppression.

**Describe how a different story might have been told with a character from a different ethnic or socio-economic group.**

If a story were told in this time period from the point of view of a poor peasant, I think there would be more of a focus on how the peasant expected Mao to improve his life. As that hoped-for improvement turned into dire poverty and famine, I think the peasant might have become angry. The sense of betrayal might have led to violent acts.

**What message do you believe your book’s author hopes his reader will take away from this story.**

I think the author, who was also the main character, hoped that readers would see how quickly life in China changed, and how little could be done to stop it once Mao had the young and the poor acting like gangs. They liked the power so he used it. I think she also hoped that readers could see that it is possible to retain one’s dignity and virtue in any situation, if one is determined enough.