

An odyssey through totalitarian China

by Alice Robb

Life and Death in Shanghai,

by Nien Cheng

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In the light of happenings in China today, this book is a must. So many truths of today's Chinese people and their political situation are presented, that one reading is hardly adequate to assimilate the facts.

Mrs. Cheng says at the very end of this outstanding book: "Deng Xiaoping and the other main actors on China's political stage are old men in their eighties and late seventies. In a few years, they will fade from the scene. The fate of China in the 1990s will be decided by a new generation of leaders who may or may not be able to sustain the authoritarian rule of the Communist Party and at the same time achieve economic progress."

Nien Cheng was a rich widow living with her daughter and three servants. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution brought many changes, but life outside the home had not particularly touched her family other than the fact that as the servants shopped, they would be called names, because they worked for a "capitalist."

In 1935, Nien and her husband met in England where they were students as he worked on his Ph.D. After their marriage, they returned to the wartime capital Chongqing, at which time he joined the Kuomintang government as a diplomatic officer. Their daughter, Meiping, was born in 1942 in Australia.

When the Communist Army arrived in Shanghai in 1949, Mr. Cheng was director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the city office. Having been invited by the communist individual who took over his position, he remained during the transitional adjustment period, as adviser on foreign af-

fairs to the new government city officials.

With the change in government, only one large oil company chose to remain in mainland China, and it was with this organization that he was allowed to accept an offer of employment and leave the People's Government during the following year. He became the general manager of the Shanghai office. Communist Party officers favored trade with the West, and had good relationships with the company and its Chinese management.

Mr. Cheng died in 1957, and a British general manager succeeded him, and Nien was asked by the company to become his assistant. Her position was to settle difficulties in such a way that the Chinese government officials would not lose face, nor would the company have to sacrifice its dignity. She worked in the capacity of adviser to management until the spring of 1966, when the Shanghai office of the company closed. Always, she had been thankful that she had a job at which she excelled and she enjoyed being known as the only woman in Shanghai who held a top office in a important company. Soon, everything in her life was to be changed: how much and to what extent she had no idea. Then the Cultural Revolution really began!

The 'struggle' meetings

Soon after the company had closed its doors, Nien was called to attend her first "struggle" meeting where the former chief accountant of her office was targeted. He was denounced by speaker after speaker and then by his former co-workers, who criticized him for the same "crimes" he had been accused of earlier. His own self-criticism he read from a prepared statement which declared the degradation that had beset his life. She knew that he had done none of the things he had admitted to, and in order to have been brought to his knees with such admissions, she was sure, he had been worn down to complete exhaustion of both mind and body. Someone remarked, "I hate 'struggle' meetings. Somehow everybody behaves like savages." Friends pointed out to her that the officials sought to frighten her with that meeting and later she was interrogated several times and told that she must confess the wrongs that she had done in the name of the imperialist company. She steadfastly maintained her innocence of any wrongdoing and that the company had been very careful to observe all government regulations and had done nothing illegal.

The parades of the "Red Guards," and new group of young people appearing on the scene, seemed to bring about a real change to others of her social position. And so she waited, knowing that the time would come when she too would be their victim as they stormed through her home in a mad frenzy of destruction. The dreaded intrusion came on Aug. 30. The "Red Guards" were officially approved to do away with the "Four Olds"—culture, customs, habits, and ways of thinking—and they were ruthless.

Following that difficult experience, she was placed under house arrest, with the “Red Guards” sharing the watch. She and her daughter were each allowed one suitcase of winter clothes and a canvas bag of bedding. She had been able to keep what she was wearing and one change of clothing together with a sweater. The Guards had taken most of her furniture and household goods. Only in the bathroom was privacy permitted. She was not allowed to converse nor to eat with either her daughter or her servant.

Nien was taken to a meeting in the late afternoon of Sept. 27, where she was the object of a “struggle” meeting. Much later, she learned that the date of this meeting had been delayed again and again as officials tried to get her daughter to participate in her denunciation. However, Meiping absolutely refused. This meeting resulted in Nien’s being found guilty and urged to confess her “crimes.” Even though she responded with a “not guilty” plea, which was ignored, she was taken—handcuffed—to Number One Detention House. It was 2 a.m. when she finally arrived at her cell with no belongings. She had never imagined a place so bad or so filthy in all her experience. Even so, she had to lie down and go to sleep, with the light on.

Early morning brought the first day of prison life to this lovely lady, who was to be known as #1806 for the next six and one-half years as she remained in solitary confinement. She received the clothing and bedding that had been allowed by the “Red Guards” and she was permitted to arrange the purchase of needed items for cleanliness, eating, and drinking. Usually brooms and needles could be borrowed only for use on Sundays; however, a broom was available to her, since she had just arrived. She proceeded to clean the cell from top to bottom as well as possible while she was being criticized for bringing capitalistic ideas into prison. She even covered the dirty line on the wall by her bed with pieces of toilet paper, pasted there with crushed grains of rice from her meager food rations.

She was now ready, as a devout Christian, to face life in the prison; and being innocent, she was determined to clear her name of any wrongdoing. She worried about her daughter, not wanting her to face a future knowing her mother had been sentenced for “crimes” against the government. I’m sure that Meiping was the reason that Nien coped so well through all her difficulties of imprisonment. Her health was not the best at the outset, as she only had one kidney. She suffered from an inadequate diet and every winter from intense cold. Her health problems were badly treated, as the “doctors” outside the hospital were learning to be doctors through experience. This slight-statured, 51-year-old woman was physically mistreated almost every time she left for interrogations. Had she known of her daughter’s fate before she left the prison, she might not have been able to maintain sufficient stamina to endure the extreme hardships.

At her various interrogations, she was accused of many

so-called “crimes”: being a class enemy, a dirty capitalist, a running dog of imperialism, a foreign spy conspiring with foreign powers, and others having to do with the fact that she worked for a company which was then approved by the government, and also that she was educated abroad.

Finding inner strength

During all these times of accusation, she never faltered. She was not going to let them get the best of her. She had a directness of purpose in line with her decision to simply tell the truth and not let them confuse the issues. She staunchly upheld her position: “I have never done anything against the People’s Government.” “I have no connection with any foreign government.” “I’ve never committed a crime in my whole life.” “I am not guilty.” “I have nothing to confess.”

Many of Nien’s friends managed to be released from prison simply by patiently living through each day as it came, following directions and hanging on till they were allowed so-called “freedom.” This she was unable to cope with. When depression deepened and she could tolerate her solitary state no longer, she had to cause things to happen. She would demand the attention of the interrogator—knowing he was not available. She would scream her innocence—knowing the other inmates were approving of her resistance to authority. These sessions often ended in her removal from the cell to another, where she couldn’t be heard, and moreover, resulted in severe physical abuse. But that was better than being ignored, and after each such episode, she always felt a lifting of her spirits. She needed contact with people, regardless!

Cooped up in that prison cell for so many years, she learned to appreciate the true meaning of freedom after the lights were switched off in the cell and before daybreak. Short though it was, this time of darkness was a lifesaver for her, a time when she could reach within herself to reassert the dignity of her being, and she could experience a feeling of renewal for the new day. Out from under the watchful eyes of the guards, she had a precious moment of freedom, when she could release herself from the confines of the prison cell.

The Chinese have lived in a constantly changing environment for so many years, that it’s not surprising that we may wonder if China can ever become a stable entity. Throughout her long history, the world has been shown that the Chinese are a patient people—probably more so than the inhabitants of any other country. But from the events of recent years, it would appear that this renowned attribute is growing thin, and that her people are beginning to want relief, and positive action in the direction of stability in their personal life patterns. Change is the only constancy in which they live. Each new innovation brings its never-ending promises. Soon, however, the people realize that the promises are empty and reality is often worse than before. How soon are these wants to become demands backed by a citizenry who have completely lost tolerance with their leaders?