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## Nien Cheng, Memoirist, Is Dead at 94

By [WILLIAM GRIMES](#)

Nien Cheng, whose memoir, “Life and Death in Shanghai,” offered a harrowing account of the Cultural Revolution in China and her years of imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Red Guards, died on Nov. 2 at her home in Washington. She was 94.

The cause was cardiovascular and renal disease, said Catherine Mack, the executor of her estate.

As the widow of a diplomat and businessman and an adviser to a foreign [oil](#) company, Mrs. Cheng found herself in a politically dangerous position as the Cultural Revolution gathered strength in the 1960s. In 1966 she was arrested by Red Guards and charged with espionage.

She spent the next six and a half years in solitary confinement at the No. 1 Detention House in Shanghai, harshly interrogated and beaten by her jailers, to whom she responded with defiance and mockery.

“I grew up with a strong sense of loyalty, and duty, to my country,” she told The Los Angeles Times in 1987. “I felt humiliated that they should accuse me, who loved my country, of being a spy. I could not accept it, I had to fight. In prison sometimes I would get so mad — I was rarely depressed — by and large my predominant emotion was anger.”

In 1973 she was told that the authorities had agreed to release her in recognition of an “improvement in her way of thinking and an attitude of repentance.” She refused to leave and vowed to stay in prison until the government declared her innocent and issued an apology in the press.

Astonished prison officials pushed her out the door, grumbling that “in all the years of the detention house, we have never had a prisoner like you, so truculent and argumentative.”

Once outside she learned that her only child, Meiping, an actress with the Shanghai Film Studio, was dead. The official explanation was suicide, but Mrs. Cheng learned that her daughter had been murdered by the Red Guards for refusing to denounce her mother as a class enemy.

In 1987, after emigrating to Canada and then the United States, Mrs. Cheng published her memoir, which began, memorably, with the sentence, “The past is forever with me, and I remember it all.”

The book won critical acclaim and became a best seller. Stanley Karnow, reviewing it in The Washington Post, echoed the prevailing critical response when he wrote that “her narrative deserves to rank with the foremost prison diaries of our time.”

Yao Nien was born on Jan. 28, 1915, in Beijing. Her father, the descendant of wealthy landowners, was a

vice minister in the navy. In 1935 she went to study at the London School of Economics, where she became a fervent socialist and met her husband, Kang-chi Cheng.

Mr. Cheng entered the diplomatic service after returning to China and was posted to Australia, where he and Mrs. Cheng spent the war years, returning to China in 1948.

When Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists fled to Taiwan the next year, the Chengs remained in China. Mr. Cheng became the general manager for Shell Oil in Shanghai, and after his death in 1957 Mrs. Cheng became a special adviser to the company, negotiating its tenuous relationship with the new Communist government.

She later speculated that her interrogators were eager to compile evidence that would incriminate Zhou Enlai, the prime minister, who opposed the Cultural Revolution. Specifically, she theorized, they hoped to extract a confession that a business trip to Britain that she and her husband had taken with Zhou's approval was a spy mission.

After being released from prison, Mrs. Cheng, still regarded as politically suspect, moved back into her house, now subdivided and occupied by numerous tenants. In 1980 she gained permission to leave China. Once abroad, she had access to money in her husband's overseas accounts and was able to live in relative comfort in Washington.

There are no immediate survivors.

“She was a humble person,” said James A. Dorn, the vice president for academic affairs at the [Cato Institute](#) and a friend of Mrs. Cheng's. “She said: ‘I didn't really do anything. I just recorded what I saw, and I wrote it for my daughter.’”

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