

# In era of upheaval, author stood against storm



Chinese author Nien Cheng during a visit to Hong Kong in 1993. Photo: Sam Chan

## James Dorn

Nien Cheng, the author of *Life and Death in Shanghai*, died in Washington on November 2 at the age of 94. She was an incredibly courageous woman and the embodiment of grace and wisdom.

She loved traditional Chinese culture, but her world was shattered on August 30, 1966, when Red Guards ransacked her home and, on September 27, arrested her. She spent the next 6½ years in Shanghai's No 1 Detention House, in solitary confinement.

Communist Party interrogators accused Cheng of being a spy, but her real "crime" was that she was viewed as a "capitalist roader". She had attended the London School of Economics in the 1930s, where she met her husband, Kang-chi Cheng, who later became general manager for Shell in Shanghai.

When he died, in 1957, Nien Cheng became a special adviser to the new general manager. She was the highest-ranked businesswoman in China at the time. Her skills in dealing with party officials were invaluable and helped Shell stay in China until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

During her imprisonment, Cheng refused to admit to any wrongdoing. She was tortured and nearly died, but her determination to survive and her deep faith gave her the strength to persevere. She was released from prison on March 27, 1973, only to find the Red Guards had murdered her only child, Meiping, for failing to "confess" and denounce her mother as a "class enemy". Cheng's one hope in life was gone; she left China forever in 1980, and settled in Washington in 1983.

Anyone who knew Cheng could immediately see that she was special – even the doctor at the No 1 Detention House said he never met a more "truculent and argumentative" prisoner. When she learned of her imminent release, she refused to leave the prison unless the authorities declared, in writing, that she was "innocent of any crime or political mistake". She insisted that they offer "an apology for wrongful arrest", and called the official statement "a sham and a fraud".

After nearly seven years in prison, she declared: "I shall remain here until a proper conclusion is reached about my case." The authorities refused, and the guards had to drag her out of prison.

It is ironic that Cheng learned about socialism during her studies at the London School of Economics, where she became a leftist. In her essay *The Roots of China's Crisis*, she wrote: "When I read a book on

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Nien Cheng, author

the Soviet Union by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, I thought, 'How wonderful and idealistic socialism sounds'."

Later, after her husband had served in Australia as a diplomat for the Nationalist government, the Chengs made the fateful decision to return to China in late 1948. They and many of their Western-educated friends were seduced by Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) call for democracy, and wanted to help build a new China.

In her essay, Cheng notes that while she had learned about socialist ideals, such as the apparent success of Soviet central planning and state ownership, her professors never talked of "class struggle" or "the realities of communist rule".

What she painfully discovered was that in a society where individuals have no economic freedom, and there is no genuine rule of law, no one is safe from the power of the state. The Communist Party under Mao's iron fist destroyed civil society and traditional culture.

As she wrote in *Life and Death in Shanghai*, a new China was created after the communists' victory in 1949, but it was not the socialist ideal she had envisioned. Rather, the party created "mindless robots, unburdened by the capacity for independent thinking or a human conscience". Success depended on power, and justice vanished. "The result was a fundamental change in the basic values of Chinese society," she wrote.

Mao's mantra was: "Strike hard against the slightest sign of private property." Cheng's property, including her priceless porcelain collection, was confiscated. Her daughter was murdered and her freedom destroyed by the state.

While in jail, in 1971, the inmates were assembled and an official announced: "Many of you are here precisely because you worshipped the capitalist world of the

imperialists and belittled socialist China. You placed your hope in the capitalist world and believed that one day capitalism would again prevail in China."

Today, mainland China is perhaps more capitalist than any other country, but it is "crony capitalism". The nation lacks full-fledged private property rights, especially in land; there is no independent judiciary to protect people and property against the party's monopoly on power; and freedom of religion and expression are sharply curtailed. The battle for justice that Cheng fought has not yet been won.

In her book, Cheng recognised the significance of president Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, and the importance of engaging China. She witnessed the progress the mainland had made since Deng Xiaoping's (鄧小平) opening to the outside world in 1978. She understood the critical role of trade and investment in linking China to the West. But she also understood that, "Unless and until a political system rooted in law, rather than personal power, is firmly established in China, the road to the future will always be full of twists and turns."

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