

Chinese Author Described Horrors of Cultural Revolution

By Sarah Williams

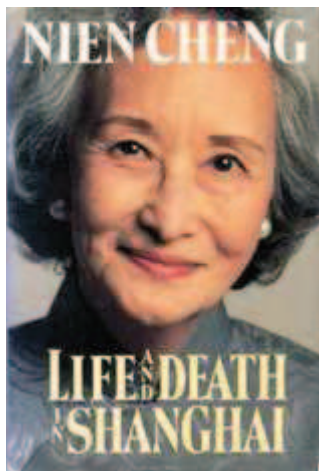
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Chinese-American author Nien Cheng, whose best-selling book "Life and Death in Shanghai" described her imprisonment and torture during China's Cultural Revolution, has died in Washington, D.C. at the age of 94. Her book, published in 1987, chronicled life in China when Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong tried to purge his rivals and reassert power.

"It is a powerful story about the dignity of the individual and the power of the individual even in the face of totalitarianism, even in the face of terrible persecution, which included in her case being jailed for six and a half years and having her daughter killed as a result of not admitting to something that she never did," said Ian Vasquez, who directs the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute and was Cheng's friend.



Nien Cheng was born in 1915 in Beijing to a wealthy family, and studied at the London School of Economics. She married a Chinese diplomat and businessman who eventually became general manager of Shell Oil in Shanghai. The couple had one daughter, Meiping, before the death of Cheng's husband in 1957. Cheng remained a manager at Shell until her arrest in 1966.

Xu Wenli, a Chinese dissident now teaching at Brown University in Rhode Island, said Cheng's life merged East and West. "What's really interesting about Nien Cheng's book and her personal life experience is that although she's a Chinese-born national, that she had been heading a Western-based organization for most of her life and that she had been educated in the West, so through her writing we can really see how she's managed to bring both these cultures together," he said.

In 1966, the Red Guard invaded and ransacked Cheng's home in Shanghai. She was later arrested, charged with being an "imperialist" spy and held in a detention center. She endured solitary confinement, and was tortured. After her release in 1973, she was told her daughter had committed suicide. She later discovered that her daughter had been killed by the Red Guard.

Xu Wenli said Cheng's traditional upbringing probably helped her defy her captors. "One of the values that we learned is a Chinese phrase that means that one would rather be killed than be shamed," he said. "So there is an idea that dignity must be preserved at all costs, no matter the situation."

Cheng left China in 1980, and settled in Washington, D.C. She wrote her book in English, and following its success, traveled and lectured in Britain, Singapore and Hong Kong. She became an American citizen in 1988, and was a guest at a White House dinner where she sat next to President Ronald Reagan.

Ian Vasquez and his wife had tea several times at Cheng's apartment. "We would discuss all sorts of things, mostly world events, and her views about China today and politics in the United States, and she was very sharp, right up until the very end," he said.