

A close-up portrait of Nien Cheng, an elderly woman with short, wavy grey hair, wearing a light blue collared shirt and pearl earrings. She has a gentle smile and is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

NIEN CHENG

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LIFE AND DEATH IN SHANGHAI

Nien Cheng



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To Meiping

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS BOOK is a factual account of what happened to me during the Cultural Revolution. The events are recorded in chronological order, just as they occurred. Every word spoken at the time, the reader will soon understand, was vitally important. Indeed, my survival depended on what was said to and by me. I had ample time again and again to recall scenes and conversations in a continuing effort to assess their significance. As a consequence, they are indelibly etched on my memory, and my book, including the words quoted as direct discourse, is as nearly as possible a faithful account of my experiences.

With some reluctance, I use in this book the now standard pinyin system for the transliteration of most of the Chinese names. Among the few exceptions are such old, familiar forms as Hong Kong (pinyin: Xianggang) and Kuomintang (Guomin-dang), and my husband's, my daughter's, and my own name (Zheng), which I prefer to continue to spell in English as I have done for more than fifty years.

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I
THE WIND OF REVOLUTION

1

Witch-hunt

THE PAST IS FOREVER with me and I remember it all. I now move back in time and space to a hot summer's night in July 1966, to the study of my old home in Shanghai. My daughter was asleep in her bedroom, the servants had gone to their quarters, and I was alone in my study. I hear again the slow whirling of the ceiling fan overhead; I see the white carnations drooping in the heat in the white Qianlong vase on my desk. Bookshelves line the walls in front of me, filled with English and Chinese titles. The shaded reading lamp leaves half the room in shadows, but the silk brocade of the red cushions on the white sofa gleams vividly.

An English friend, a frequent visitor to my home in Shanghai, once called it "an oasis of comfort and elegance in the midst of the city's drabness." Indeed, my house was not a mansion, and by Western standards, it was modest. But I had spent time and thought to make it a home and a haven for my daughter and myself so that we could continue to enjoy good taste while the rest of the city was being taken over by proletarian realism.

Not many private people in Shanghai lived as we did seventeen years after the Communist Party took over China. In this city of ten million, perhaps only a dozen or so families managed to preserve their old lifestyle, maintaining their original homes and employing a staff of servants. The Party did not decree how the people should live. In fact, in 1949, when the Communist army entered Shanghai, we were forbidden to discharge our domestic staff lest we aggravate the unemployment problem. But the political campaigns that periodically convulsed the country rendered many formerly wealthy people poor. When they became victims, they were forced to pay large fines or had their income drastically reduced. And many industrialists were relocated inland with their families when their factories were removed from Shanghai. I did not voluntarily change my way of life, not only because I had the means to maintain my standard of living, but also because the Shanghai municipal government treated me with courtesy and consideration through its United Front Organization. However, my daughter and I lived quietly, with circumspection. Believing the Communist Revolution a