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# Life And Death In Shanghai

LIFE AND  
DEATH  
IN SHANGHAI



NIEN CHENG

'This book conveys with power and impact the horrors faced by one brave Chinese woman during the Cultural Revolution. I believe it will prove an enduring document to one of modern history's greatest aberrations.'

Anthony Grey

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1981年9月



## Synopsis

A first-hand account of China's cultural revolution. A first-hand account of China's cultural revolution. Nien Cheng, an anglophile and fluent English-speaker who worked for Shell in Shanghai under Mao, was put under house arrest by Red Guards in 1966 and subsequently jailed. All attempts to make her confess to the charges of being a British spy failed; all efforts to indoctrinate her were met by a steadfast and fearless refusal to accept the terms offered by her interrogators. When she was released from prison she was told that her daughter had committed suicide. In fact Meiping had been beaten to death by Maoist revolutionaries.

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## Customer Reviews

It is very unlikely that I would have discovered this book if not for a Chinese friend of mine who strongly recommended this book to me. While I learned to trust her literary taste, this was one time when I was a bit skeptical. The brief description of the book didn't seem to agree with many things that I had learned during my formative years. Still, based on my past experience with her recommendations, I wanted to give it a try. As I started reading, I quickly got drawn in by the vivid

narration. It felt like I am there in Shanghai in the late 1960s, watching the Chinese Cultural Revolution unfold in front of my own eyes. While I could not break away from reading the book, something nagged me to doubt the perspective of the autobiographer, who was a member of the privileged class, and therefore seen as a "class enemy" by the Red Guard and the Chinese authority. She was brutally persecuted and spent years in solitary detention. Just when all this was happening in China, I was growing up in Calcutta. During those early days of the Cultural Revolution, a political movement gathered steam in my part of India. Locally termed the Naxalite movement, it was the action of the Maoist faction of the Communist Party of India. At the same time similar movements were growing up in many parts of Europe, Latin America, and the rest of the world, all inspired by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China. This movement, mostly led by the college students in and around Calcutta, eventually took a huge toll and thousands died as a result of clashes with police, rival political groups, or in police custody. In those days it was hard to find a single building in Calcutta where the walls were not covered by stenciled images of Mao, with the absurd sounding slogan "China's chairman is our chairman". The little Red Book of Mao's quotations were omnipresent. Romanticized stories of the Cultural Revolution floated in and energized a whole generation of bright young people. Many believed they were witnessing the start of an ideal society with brand new values. This book told a very different story. It told the story of a time when a bunch of young people were convinced that almost anyone outside of the working class was not to be trusted. Intellectuals and teachers were forced to give up their professions and pick up hard labor, all foreign books, music, art was abandoned and destroyed. Almost anyone with any past western connection were seen as spies. Thousands were jailed or killed simply on the basis of suspicion. Gangs of Red Guards roamed the streets and took whatever action they felt was necessary to punish and destroy the "Counter Revolutionaries". As a result of all this, people stopped trusting anyone, even closest family members, because under pressure anyone could point fingers. Those were horribly brutal times in China. Six years later we came to know of the ouster of the Gang of Four in China, the mastermind behind the horrible atrocities that happened in the name of the Cultural Revolution. Even though the authorities never directly blamed Mao or denounced the Cultural Revolution, all the old policies were reversed, and today's China is very far from the days of the Cultural Revolution. In spite of all that, somewhere deep in my mind, the romantic notions probably persisted. That was perhaps why my initial reaction was slightly doubtful. But as I read more, and also based on many other books I have read recently about that time in China, I realized that even if you discount the political beliefs of the writer, one cannot deny the inhuman conditions that prevailed, and the sheer madness of the ideology. What is most sobering is the fact that

perfectly smart and well meaning people are capable of being blinded by a powerful ideology where we stop to question the facts. Anything that does not fit the ideological mold is ignored or explained away. That is the danger of an ideology, any ideology. Our intelligence is no guarantee that we would not fall victim of its anesthetizing effect. Ideologies are the thinking crutch of the intellectually lazy, where once you accept the framework, you don't have to do much critical thinking anymore, as the ideology does it for you. It is a black box where you can throw in your problems and the moral answer pops out. In 1977, just after the ouster of the Gang of Four, my parents visited China for the first time. At one point they visited Mao's mausoleum, who died an year earlier. My mother, not a particularly political person, saw the body of the man and started to weep. When I asked her what made her cry, she said she was thinking of the the thousands of young people in Calcutta who gave their lives believing in this man. I wonder what would have been her reaction if she also knew that thousands of innocent people were tortured and killed in China under his rule, and perhaps with his knowledge. Such are the complexities of history.

Life and Death in Shanghai is Nien Cheng's memoir of her harrowing and tragic life under Communist rule in China. It's a long book that might have been shortened up by a third to improve focus and readability. Although I've rated it at 4 stars, I cannot recommend it as an enjoyable or easy read. In addition to reading about the author's life, you will receive excellent information about the workings of the Communist Party and the continual shifts of power within the leadership and how this affected the Chinese people in their daily lives. One issue I had was the author's rather dry reportage style, which I concluded might be a reflection of her stoicism. Although she is the hero of the story, she appears remote and steely. Perhaps these characteristics, combined with her fearlessness, were exactly what allowed her to survive her ordeal. I really can't blame her for allowing herself to feel self pity and to complain about her circumstances from time to time. Her reactions at first seem naive and unrealistic given she had already lived through many phases of the Revolution under Mao's takeover before she is imprisoned. She knows how the system works, but of course, it rapidly deteriorated especially after the failure of the Great Leap Forward. The author was privileged before the Revolution, and continued to receive special treatment throughout her time in China. It does appear at times that she feels entitled to better treatment than others around her and this lends an air of arrogance to her story. Ms. Cheng's painstaking details of her possessions, her imprisonment, her frequent interrogations, struggle meetings and mistreatment by her guards may weary certain readers. I found as I continued to read the story, my admiration for her intelligence, determination, unwavering declarations of innocence and her cunning grew. The

memoir is slow to wind up after the author's release, subsequent reintegration into society and decision to leave China. This is a serious, lengthy and sober study of one woman's survival in a murderous and chaotic time and place that seems very alien to Westerners.

Worried at first that I might not get the parcel from the U.S since this book is not that welcomed in my hometown, the Communist China. I have heard a little about the Cultural Revolution. Only very little useful and genuine information can be got from the history textbooks in China since it's not a very happy period even in CPC's eyes. This memoir, is a precious first-handed material to know something about the darkest time in Chinese history. I called it the darkest(not one of the darkest) because it has such a deep influence on future generations and the contemporary social hyeterias. The Cultural Revolution eradicated the most precious and nobel essences in Chinese people and undermined the seeds of ignorance, hatred, and other sins that permanently changed the histroy of China.

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