

Life and Death in Shanghai Study Guide

Life and Death in Shanghai by Nien Cheng

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Life and Death in Shanghai Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Part I: Chapter I, Witch Hunt.....	6
Part I: Chapter Two, Interval before the Storm.....	8
Part I: Chapter 3, The Red Guards.....	10
Part I: Chapter 4, House Arrest.....	11
Part II: Chapter 5, Solitary Confinement.....	12
Part II: Chapter 6, Interrogation.....	13
Part II: Chapter 7, The January Revolution and Military Control.....	14
Part II: Chapter 8, Party Factions.....	15
Part II: Chapter 9, Persecution Continued.....	16
Part II: Chapter 10, My Brother's Confession.....	18
Part II: Chapter 11, A Kind of Torture.....	19
Part II: Chapter 12, Release.....	20
Part III: Chapter 13, Where is Meiping?.....	21
Part III: Chapter 14, The Search for the Truth.....	23
Part III: Chapter 15, A Student Who Was Different.....	24
Part III: Chapter 16, The Death of Mao.....	25
Part III: Chapter 17, Rehabilitation.....	26
Part III: Chapter 18, Farewell to Shanghai.....	27
Characters.....	28
Objects/Places.....	32
Themes.....	34
Style.....	36



Quotes..... 38
Topics for Discussion..... 40

Plot Summary

The novel is an autobiography of Nien Cheng, depicting her life during the Cultural Revolution in China. Cheng begins her story from the time right before the Cultural Revolution begins and ends with her relocation to the United States many decades later, including her compelling account of the six and a half years she spent in a detention house under false imprisonment.

In the beginning of the autobiography, Cheng discusses her life and former management position at Shell Oil while in Shanghai. She gives great detail on her life, home, activities and family, including her daughter Meiping and deceased husband. She is surrounded by beauty and manages to live a privileged lifestyle among things that are considered "Western" or American or British in influence. When the Cultural Revolution begins, Cheng is not terribly worried since the political movements initiated by Mao Zedong are frequent occurrences and typically end as quickly as they begin. However, the political situation gathers with intensity and Cheng's life is irrevocably changed when Red Guards come to her home to destroy it one morning. She is attacked for being a "capitalist" and a friend of foreign countries and a spy against China. Under these charges, she is eventually brought to No. 1 Detention House for imprisonment that will last for six and a half years.

For the entire time that Cheng is imprisoned in the Detention House, she endures incredible punishments and psychological torments. She frequently ends up in the hospital and has illnesses due to the lack of nutrition and poor conditions, including extremely cold temperatures. Throughout these situations, she is brought before various interrogators who threaten her when she does not confess to imagined crimes or absurd charges against her. She keeps her wit and remains strong through various physical and mental exercises that she gives herself to stay sharp and alert.

Cheng is finally released thanks to a change in the political situation. However, even to the end of her imprisonment, Cheng denies any wrongdoing and even refuses to leave the detention house until a full retraction of her false imprisonment is printed in the newspaper. Once she is forced to leave, her daughter does not greet her at the door. Cheng immediately realizes that her daughter has died. Cheng's goddaughter tells her that Meiping committed suicide during Cheng's imprisonment and the second half of Cheng's life begins. Although she is released from prison, Cheng works relentlessly to find out what really happened to her daughter while adjusting to the new life outside the detention house and in China after the Cultural Revolution. After the truth of Meiping's death is revealed, Cheng makes plans to leave China for good and settle in the United States. She obtains a passport by telling Chinese authorities that she is going to America for a family reunion with her two sisters that live there.

She settles into the United States and resumes a peaceful life there. However, throughout her time of imprisonment, Cheng's sense of justice remains strong despite all that has happened to her. She ends by leaving China and saying how strong her love

for the country is and how hard she tried to make the area her home, even if she did fail through no fault of her own.



Part I: Chapter I, Witch Hunt

Part I: Chapter I, Witch Hunt Summary and Analysis

The story of Nien Cheng's life during the Cultural Revolution begins on July 1966 on a hot summer's evening. She is sitting in the study of her old home and her daughter is asleep in her bedroom upstairs. She is one of a dozen families among 10 million people that continue to live in a fashion that is "Western" style. She has servants and enjoys many luxuries from her days working as a Shell Oil manager. She received this job after her husband passed away nine years earlier in 1957. Cheng continues to work as a Shell assistant to the management staff until 1966. Her role during her tenure at Shell was to help foreign managers steer clear of the numerous political and social pitfalls that existed in China at the time.

Early the next morning, Cheng is awoken at a quarter to six by two men who want to speak with her. She realizes they are probably here with bad news and so delays rushing down to see them. Two hours later, she comes downstairs and is immediately taken to a "struggle" meeting or a staged political rally where a single person — in this case a former Shell employee named Tao Feng — is ridiculed and harassed for being a capitalist and a spy working against the Chinese government. Cheng is surprised, but is aware that these meetings exist, although this is her first one.

After the meeting, she is brought into a room by other men and asked her opinion about the meeting. Her responses are frank and anger the men. They allow her to leave. On the way home, she sees her friend Winnie who is a teacher and has already suffered a great deal in past political situations in China. Mao is wary of intellectuals who question him and his policies and might usurp his power. For this reason, Winnie and her husband, who is also a teacher, come to represent a threat to Mao's power and suffer injustices similar to what other intellectuals in China must suffer at the time. Rather than teach, the teachers are forced to create "big character posters" that denounce other intellectuals and support Mao. In this way, the political situation in China is already shown to be tenuous and has created an environment where individuals are not encouraged to create a better environment and society, but instead simply support Mao's power — no matter the overall loss to the community. Winnie warns Cheng to not anger the men that brought her to the struggle meeting.

Meiping is Cheng's daughter. She is a film actress and a very successful individual. She has been brought up in a Chinese society that looks down on capitalists and her luxurious background has made her an outcast in a society that now prefers the plebeian worker. Thanks to Marxism, Meiping has to work harder and longer for things that individuals from a poor background are frequently handed. She does not begrudge the system, however, because she was raised in this environment and knows no other way.



Meiping is alarmed when she hears that her mother was brought to a struggle meeting and senses that things in their lives are going to change. That night, she cannot sleep and goes downstairs to play the piano instead.



Part I: Chapter Two, Interval before the Storm

Part I: Chapter Two, Interval before the Storm Summary and Analysis

The struggle meetings and interviews continue for Cheng. She is asked to write down various activities, but her correspondences are rarely actually read. In the middle of all this activity, Mr. Hu visits Cheng. He is a former friend of her late husband and although male friendship with women is not socially typical in China at the time, he visits her out of a sense of duty to Cheng's late husband. Mr. Hu has been struggling with the latest political changes as well. He has gone from the owner of a paint factory to the lowest position available after the Chinese government takes over the business. He receives a fraction of its worth and instead, other men who are not skilled to run his factory are put in charge of the company. They are rewarded with these top positions simply because their political loyalty cannot be questioned; their skill or intelligence is never reviewed. Mr. Hu also warns Cheng not to anger the men that are interviewing her and bringing her to these meetings.

Mr. Hu's visits are a benefit to Cheng because he was once a friend and once lived a similar lifestyle to Cheng. The actions of the Chinese government against him are an excellent parallel to what Cheng is experiencing and how to respond. Mr. Hu does not get frustrated or upset, but instead is humble and patient, working the lowest position of his own factory and appreciating Chinese culture and history despite his present circumstances.

The next morning, Chen-Ma, Cheng's house servant, returns home quite upset because the Red Guards are dismantling the Buddhism temple nearby. Although Cheng is Christian and the changes do not affect her religious practices, it shows how far the power of the Red Guards has come and casts a foreboding shadow on her life. Cheng's friend Li Zhen visits her that evening. She is a music teacher who has lost everything due to the political changes of the past, including her children who have moved from China and never return. As they are discussing the changes that are occurring, loud parades filled with Red Guards drown their words as they pass by Cheng's home. It will be the last time Cheng sees Li Zhen as the teacher will commit suicide only a month later when the Red Guards come to harass her.

It is Meiping's birthday and she jokingly says it is a birthday she will never forget. Unfortunately, she is very right with this statement. Cheng goes to the bank the next day to see if she can pull some money from the banks before things deteriorate even further. She succeeds without problem, but is troubled by the activities she sees on the street by the Red Guards. As more and more of Cheng's neighbors are attacked and their homes are destroyed by the Red Guards, Cheng takes care of business. She offers to

let her servants leave and tries to give them money. And then, she just waits for the Red Guards to arrive at her home.



Part I: Chapter 3, The Red Guards

Part I: Chapter 3, The Red Guards Summary and Analysis

As the Cultural Revolution becomes more intense, struggle sessions and political indoctrinations take place at all hours of the day and night. Cheng hears a heavy motor vehicle speed up and stop in front of her home. The doorbell starts to ring incessantly and she realizes that the Red Guards have finally come to destroy her home. There are roughly 30 to 40 high school students that enter her home. They demand to have the keys to her home and start to smash mirrors, precious goods and catalog her jewelry. They are doing all of this in the name of performing "revolutionary activities" that are compliant with the wishes of Mao.

Cheng tries to explain to the students that although they are keeping things they believe are important like cameras and electronics, they should save the truly valuable pieces of her china or porcelain. They argue with her and rebuke her "capitalistic" tendencies until she can convince them that these pieces would fetch far more money for their revolution than a mere piece of electronics. After hours of destruction, they do not touch Meiping's room because she is a working woman and not considered a capitalist like her mother.

After the first set of Red Guards come and go, another new set of Red Guards appear shortly afterward. However, upon seeing that others had come before them, they quickly leave. Meiping comes home soon after and tells her mother that their way of life has been utterly destroyed and will never be restored again. No matter what has happened to their home, Meiping still proclaims her extreme love for China, no matter if its actions are right or wrong. This allegiance towards the country that will ultimately destroy Meiping and terrorize Cheng is extraordinary. Although their lives are tenuous and anything could happen to them at any time, both Cheng and Meiping maintain a strong allegiance and loyalty towards the country. They are at the whim of political men whose paranoia might alter their lives negatively at any time, but they still love their homeland.

Part I: Chapter 4, House Arrest

Part I: Chapter 4, House Arrest Summary and Analysis

Cheng wakes up the morning after the Red Guards have destroyed her home to total chaos. She cannot do anything, including clean, for fear that the Red Guards will inevitably return and accuse her of trying to hide something. The newspaper that morning warns that capitalists are evil and have been found hiding diamonds and gold bars in various rooms of their homes. Meiping comes home for just a little while to check on her mother before she has to run to the studio again. A few days later, the Red Guards return, demanding the gold bars that Cheng has hidden in her home. Of course, Cheng does not have such valuables lying around or hidden anywhere and the Red Guards leave.

However, the Red Guards return the next day and continue to terrorize Cheng. They put her on house arrest and she is allowed only a set of box springs to sleep on while Red Guards wait outside her door to prevent her leaving the house. After a week of this, they allow her additional space to walk in the garden. Here, Meiping is able to leave her secret notes to lift her spirits. Meanwhile, the violence in the city increases.

On September 27, Cheng is taken to a building where she has to write a self-criticism of herself, her history and her husband. In the end, they ask her to confess to an unnamed offense. Cheng balks at the idea of it. One of the Red Guards that had previously ransacked Cheng's home comes in front of her and urgently whispers that she must confess or they will take her to prison. When Cheng still continues to refuse to confess, she is pushed into a jeep forcibly by someone and driven through the dark streets of Shanghai to a detention house.



Part II: Chapter 5, Solitary Confinement

Part II: Chapter 5, Solitary Confinement Summary and Analysis

As Cheng is being taken to the detention house, the streets of Shanghai are awash with people. She can see huge trucks filled with the goods and valuables from the capitalist homes. Whenever the jeep has to stop, the crowds will peer in the car to see the "class enemy" that Cheng has been declared.

Cheng is taken to No. 1 Detention House, which is specially reserved for political prisoners. Cheng is checked in and she has some money on her that she was going to give her gardener. Instead, the guards take this from her and hold it so she can buy goods with it later. Cheng walks into her prison room and is horrified by what she sees. She is living in pure filth and dirt. She cannot sleep due to a bright light hanging above her head and the immense dirt on her bed and on the wall next to her bed. She must endure through this and the horrible food that she is given. She is allowed to have a broom and needle on Sunday, which she can use to clean the room and uses toilet paper sheets to paper the wall by her bed to make it more manageable. Also, she sews a pair of night shades to place over her eyes so that she can sleep in the evening.

In the morning, she is questioned by guards about the changes in her cell, but Cheng wisely quotes Chairman Mao's own statements about cleanliness so that she might keep the revisions. The guards each demand that she confess so that she will be given more lenient treatment and released from the detention house. Cheng ignores them. After a few days, she is allowed outside so she can get some fresh air and exercise. In this way, weeks pass for Cheng. She sees a spider in her cell and this tiny animal becomes a symbol of life and hope for Cheng. She watches it and takes care to not disturb it while it makes its webs and finds food. It helps to alleviate her feelings of complete isolation.

Cheng starts to get a cold and it is at this moment when the guards think that Cheng is actually crying and psychologically weak that they allow her to finally speak with the interrogator.



Part II: Chapter 6, Interrogation

Part II: Chapter 6, Interrogation Summary and Analysis

Winter is fast approaching. On the first day of her interrogation, Cheng is doing her laundry. She drops her sheet and hurriedly races out of the cell. Cheng is eager and excited to finally have her case discussed so she can prove her innocence and be set free. Cheng sits down in the chair and detects a faint nod from her interrogator to someone over her shoulder.

Cheng immediately tells the interrogator that there has been a mistake. Next, she fights fire with fire by quoting important statements from Chairman Mao to contradict what the guards and interrogator are telling her about her capitalist background and past history as a spy for foreign countries. Throughout the interrogation, the man tries to get Cheng to say anything against the Chinese government or anything that could help them create a strong case against her. Cheng, however, keeps a sharp mind and a positive attitude, refusing to give the interrogator or guards anything to combat her with later. When she is finished, she returns to her cell to find that laundry is over and she still has a wet sheet. In order to get the guards to give her a clean, dry sheet, she negotiates a clean sheet by agreeing to write her autobiography.

However, after Cheng is finished writing her autobiography, the interrogator tells her it is far too short. She writes it again and again, but thanks to Cheng's excellent memory, she can rewrite the autobiography nearly perfectly each time. The interrogator accuses her of having a love affair with Scott, a British man that she had met while on her travels. In truth, however, there was no relationship between Cheng and Scott in any way.

When Cheng is returned to her cell after another interrogation, she is overcome with thoughts of all the innocent men and women whose lives she might have ruined simply by associating with them. Although she is innocent, she hates to think what might have happened to those individuals who are in trouble now only because they knew her or had associated with her socially at some point in the past. Rather than review her own miserable situation, Cheng feels a great deal of remorse about these other individuals.



Part II: Chapter 7, The January Revolution and Military Control

Part II: Chapter 7, The January Revolution and Military Control Summary and Analysis

Cheng waits for the interrogator to call her again, but nothing happens. She knows that something is happening in the world, but since she is cut off, she does not know exactly what is going on. Finally, one of the guards snaps at her that a revolution is going on. The revolution makes the guards distracted and during this time, a prisoner takes advantage and sings "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve. To Cheng, it is one of the most beautiful sounds she has ever heard.

The Shanghai municipal government is overthrown by rebels and Cheng's hopes for a quick release are dashed. Cheng soon begins to worry about her daughter and requests that Meiping be brought to her cell so she can be safe. The guard responds by telling her that she's crazy and that Cheng is lucky; she is fed every day and gets eight hours of sleep, which is more than the guard receives. This information shocks Cheng, and she starts to see the guards as individual people who are struggling just as hard as she is to get through daily life.

Cheng becomes sick due to the cold weather and poor living conditions. One of the guards and Director Liang of the detention house bring her hot water and watch her as she struggles to keep it down. A few nights later, Cheng and the other prisoners are forced to listen to a broadcast telling them about the revolution and political actions outside the detention house. It warns the prisoners to stop hoping to escape confession. Shortly after the message, the voice on the broadcast is outside Cheng's cell, demanding that she confess her crimes. He brings her outside her cell, but at that exact moment, another prisoner tries to commit suicide, saving Cheng by distracting the guards who tell her to return to her cell. She is immediately relieved.

Cheng continues to be sick and asks for the doctor. She is told that the doctor has been sent to the countryside for his reeducation process. A few days later, another man arrives who clearly has no medical training. He declares that she is suffering from hepatitis although she knows it is pneumonia. He only has the position of doctor in order to follow Mao's command to "learn to swim by swimming" and has been rewarded for his devout political feelings by being awarded the position of doctor for the detention house.

Cheng is finally permitted to go to the hospital. Although she is terrifically sick, she strains to look out the window at the changes that Shanghai has gone through in the last sixteen months of her detention. Although she nearly dies, Cheng recovers and is brought back to the detention house shortly after her recovery.



Part II: Chapter 8, Party Factions

Part II: Chapter 8, Party Factions Summary and Analysis

After the pneumonia she suffers, Cheng's health in general deteriorates. She starts to have difficulty eating and starts to discipline herself with mental and physical exercises to keep herself sharp and alert. One of her favorite activities is to pick a fight with the guards. Although they never realize it, starting a fight with the guards was an excellent way for Cheng to release frustration and keep her mind sharp by engaging in a verbal battle with them.

The political environment changes yet again and Cheng's interrogations resume. She is given a roommate, which is an ominous sign for her. The poor girl spends her entire time trying to bait Cheng into saying something negative. Cheng never takes the bait and rebukes her for saying things against the Cultural Revolution and the government in general. Over time, the roommate is taken out of the cell and when she returns, she is obviously upset and has been jarred by the guards and an interrogator. This continues for some time before the prisoners are all brought together to hear an announcement that she has been killed due to being a spy in their midst. Cheng wonders if the entire procedure is all an act simply for her sake, which she finds nearly impossible to believe. However, she cannot think of another reason for it.

However, Cheng notices that quickly after this announcement, the guards rush into her cell and grab the woman's blankets and clothes, which indicates to Cheng that the woman was not killed. The woman would need her blankets and clothing for the winter that was fast approaching. She wonders why the guards would have gone to all this effort to convince her that the woman was killed by their death penalty. Is her case that significant and important that they are attempting to scare her with the idea of death so she will confess?

Cheng is again questioned by the interrogator about her trips abroad but does not fall for any of their baited tricks to place any blame on her. That night, however, Cheng has a horrible hemorrhage and blood is everywhere. The blood is so much that she cannot clean it up and her cell is filthy. The next day, she is taken to the hospital.



Part II: Chapter 9, Persecution Continued

Part II: Chapter 9, Persecution Continued Summary and Analysis

Cheng is raced to the hospital in an old, dirty ambulance. She worries that she has a malignant growth but does not fear death. The Chinese people believe that life is a continuation from generation to generation. Cheng is but a chain in the line of her mother and daughter.

Once Cheng sees the nurse, the woman appears to have real medical training. She tells Cheng that there is nothing she can do, but the malnutrition is not helping her. She advises Cheng to eat as much as she can and will tell the Detention House to give her extra foods and permission to purchase vitamins. When Cheng returns from the hospital, she is allowed to purchase vitamins like glucose powder and other similar necessities. It can be argued that since Cheng's health was so poor to begin with, this aid played a significant role in her overall survival. She will find eggs and other additions in her food after this hospital visit and knows the cook is trying to help her survive.

As soon as Cheng returns from the hospital, the interrogation begins yet again. She is given a piece of paper to write her confession, but at the bottom, there is a printed part saying "Signature of Criminal." Cheng responds by adding "who did not commit a crime" after it before signing her name. The interrogators ask her to write on this paper numerous times but she continues to assert her innocence. Finally, they give up, but pull her into a car to take her to a strange building.

Although the room is full of people, Cheng realizes that they have all been brought here for her, and they are doing a struggle meeting against her. They bring out Tao, the accountant from Shell whose struggle meeting Cheng had attended earlier. When Tao claims that Cheng worked with him as a spy for the British, Cheng looks up and bursts out laughing. This reaction is not what the Chinese expect and this reaction destroys the feeling of their struggle meeting.

The tense environment changes and Cheng is brought back to her cell. The handcuffs she was made to wear during the struggle meeting are kept on and the guards are angry that she laughed at their accusations. Eventually, other guards take care of Cheng and give her extra food and remove her handcuffs. Although she is angry by Tao's betrayal, she knows he has been tormented and is at the end of his rope, so she forgives him.

The interrogation continues and Cheng is forced to go without food and reread a letter over and over again, presumably showing evidence that she worked as a British spy.



She finally passes out from the torment. They drop her back in her cell and she is ignored for days.

Cheng is suddenly summoned again and is taken to another strange building. She is put in front of a microphone and uncomfortable handcuffs are again put on her for restraint. She is pushed into extremely uncomfortable positions, including a "jet position" that Cheng later learns kills other prisoners.



Part II: Chapter 10, My Brother's Confession

Part II: Chapter 10, My Brother's Confession Summary and Analysis

Summer arrives and Cheng welcomes the warmer weather. Her interrogations resume during the rainy season. During one of her interrogations, they accuse Cheng of taking a picture in front of an enemy flag. Cheng vehemently denies this possibility, but they tell her that her own brother has agreed with the statement, saying that the picture was taken right after their mother's funeral.

After she denies this statement and they cannot prove it, they move on to another strategy for confession.

Years later, Cheng will confront her brother about this statement and his betrayal of her while she was in the Detention House. He tells her that the interrogators had said it so many times that he could not actually remember whether they had or not, but after awhile thought they must be right. She is furious at him, but he is disappointed in her for not bending with the wind like a good Chinese person should. Their relationship will be forever scarred.



Part II: Chapter 11, A Kind of Torture

Part II: Chapter 11, A Kind of Torture Summary and Analysis

The guards pressure Cheng again to confess her crimes, yet she again maintains that she has done nothing wrong. Her hardship is now a way of life for her; however, it is eroding her mental clarity.

One day, they take Cheng from her cell and put handcuffs on her too tightly to punish her until she confesses. A blizzard is going on outside her window. Despite her pleas, the handcuffs stay on and she is eventually put into solitary confinement for 24 hours. Throughout the entire time, the too-tight handcuffs are left on her hands. She is then taken back to her cell but with the handcuffs on, she cannot feed her and has extreme difficulties going to the bathroom or sleeping. Her health declines quickly; however, a guard urges her to find a way to eat despite the handicap to help her survive.

The handcuffs stay on Cheng's hands for days on end. They start to affect her mental state and she tries to do basic mathematical exercises to keep her mind alert. When she starts drifting in and out of consciousness, however, the guards come and take off her handcuffs. By this point, the handcuffs are covered in blood and pus and her wrists and arms are nearly beyond repair. It takes her over a month before she can raise her hands above her head again.

Part II: Chapter 12, Release

Part II: Chapter 12, Release Summary and Analysis

It is now 1971, and Cheng's health is declining more. One day, her book of quotations from Mao — something that should be with her at all time — is taken from her and when it is returned, the introduction by Lin Bao, Mao's top man, has been removed. In this way, Cheng realizes that the political environment is changing again.

She has real hope and waits to see what will happen next. Winter arrives, however, and nothing changes. Cheng needs a new coat and requests permission to buy new clothes as her current ones are too worn to be effective. She is denied buying new clothes, but one day, a large parcel is dropped off in her cell which contain Meiping's old clothes. This arrival greatly distresses Cheng since these clothes should be used by Meiping, and their arrival in her cell means she is dead. However, when Cheng asks the guards about her, no one answers her and they all rush away from her questions.

Finally, on March 27, 1973, Cheng is told to grab all her belongings and that will be released. However, when she hears the man tell her that she was held for giving away grain secrets to the British, she refuses to be set free. She wants a full admission that a mistake was made with her before she'll walk outside. The man, although surprised, refuses her request to stay in the Detention house and tells her that her family is waiting for her outside. Cheng races away and two female guards accompany her to the next room; she's incredibly anxious to see her daughter.

When they open the door to release Cheng, she sees a woman standing by a blue taxi, but she is too short to be Meiping. It is Cheng's goddaughter Hean instead.



Part III: Chapter 13, Where is Meiping?

Part III: Chapter 13, Where is Meiping? Summary and Analysis

As Cheng walks towards Hean, her mind screams "Meiping is dead! Where is Meiping!" Hean grabs her by the arm and they ride in the car in silence through the familiar Shanghai streets to an unfamiliar house. The Chinese government has decided that Cheng should live in the upstairs portion of a home and allocates two bedrooms to her. They assign a nurse/servant to take care of her and tell everyone that she is sick with uterine cancer and will die soon.

Hean has gone ahead and decorated the room for her with the little bit of money that she has been given. The servant's name is A-yi, but Hean warns her to be careful what she says around her and that she is nothing like Chen-ma. Cheng sees her room and then finally gets up the courage to ask Hean what has happened to Meiping. She learns of Meiping's supposed suicide and is overcome with grief. Hean then tells her about her (Hean's) new family, husband and children.

After she leaves, A-yi brings her food and for the first time in six and a half years, Cheng sees herself in the bathroom when she goes to wash her hands. She is shocked by how much she appears to have aged.

Her gums and teeth hurt terribly from all the poor nutrition in the Detention House and Cheng can hardly eat. She jokes that she should go to a dentist even before she sees a gynecologist. She notices that A-yi's room does not have a chair, so she takes an extra chair from her room and places it in A-yi's room while A-yi is getting hot water together so that Cheng can have a sponge bath. She takes a long time bathing since there are no guards to hurry her.

Two men visit Cheng the next day and officially tell her about Meiping's suicide. Cheng feigns surprise and then asks for the official details. After they leave, Cheng plans how she will change the house so that when tenants come to live downstairs, they will not have to share the kitchen area. She knows she will need a lot of money for this, and is unsure how to accomplish it.

The "back door" system is now operating throughout China. In order to see someone like the dentist, you have to know someone that works there. In this way, you can cut ahead of the enormous lines of people waiting and see the dentist right away. Someone helps Cheng find a dentist in this fashion and she begins to learn how the back door system works to obtain everything she needs, including food.

Cheng goes to the hospital and they suggest a hysterectomy for her. A week later, she has a successful surgery and while recuperating, she receives a notice that her funds have been released and she can once again access them. Now that she has sufficient



money, she can renovate the building how she sees fit. Soon after the changes are made, she receives two visitors from the Housing Bureau who strongly recommend she attend some political meetings in her neighborhood. Feigning illness and citing a need for recovery, Cheng bows out.

That evening, Cheng begins to dream about leaving China for the first time.



Part III: Chapter 14, The Search for the Truth

Part III: Chapter 14, The Search for the Truth Summary and Analysis

Cheng begins to have nightmares about Meiping every night. In order to visit the place where Meiping died without raising suspicion, she starts to walk every day. Each day, she increases her walk more and more until finally she is gone for at least two hours. Once they are a habit and A-yi stops making comments about them, she takes a bus to the spot where Meiping died. She wants to see the area for herself. Doing some research, she asks one of the women who live nearby about an actress who committed suicide there and finds out that there had been scaffolding around the building at the time of Meiping's death and a suicide would have been impossible. Only a murder could have occurred.

A family moves in downstairs named the Zhus and start to cause problems for Cheng. They are poor and want to split the electricity bill in half although there are seven of them and only Cheng and A-yi upstairs.

While walking in the market one day, Cheng sees her old gardener. He is very relieved that she is still alive. After seeing him, she is reconnected with some of her old servants, but Chen-ma is dead.

The Housing Bureau members return and ask Cheng to attend their political meetings since she is obviously well enough to walk over two hours every day. She agrees and goes through the routine of participating.

Cheng writes a letter to her old friend Winnie and visits her. Winnie has been scarred by scleroderma and is gravely ill. Cheng goes to visit her one last time before Winnie passes away. Winnie's parting words urge her to leave China while she still can make it.



Part III: Chapter 15, A Student Who Was Different

Part III: Chapter 15, A Student Who Was Different Summary and Analysis

Cheng visits the local bookstore to try to find English textbooks to help her future students; however, these books have all been banned.

For this reason, Cheng can only accept students who have studied English in the past and have books they can use. She has a number of requests of students wishing to learn English. Her most interesting student is a man named Da De, who is a former leader of the Red Guards. He does not tell Cheng any of this, but instead simply says that he is a poor student who wants to learn English. He comes from a poor background but has tremendous drive and determination coupled with extreme arrogance. Cheng feels that in another country, he would be very successful, but in China, he will most likely not amount to much.

Cheng quickly realizes she can take advantage of Da De's knowledge and information, although she realizes he is often spying on her.

On the last day of the Chinese New Year, a man named Sun Kai comes to see Cheng. He was engaged to marry Meiping before she died. Cheng learns that he often urged Meiping to marry him and move in with his family in order to have more protection during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, but she refused to get married until her mother was released from prison. Cheng is very appreciative of this new information.

Mr. Hu comes to visit Cheng as well. He offers her financial help, which she refuses, and Mr. Hu starts to visit Cheng regularly. Mrs. Zhu comments that Mr. Hu's visits will most likely predate an engagement between Cheng and Mr. Hu.

Another one of Meiping's former friends comes to visit Cheng, but she quickly realizes that he is a liar and simply a spy for the Chinese government. Although he tries to get her to say incriminating things about the government's involvement in Meiping's fake suicide, Cheng does not take the bait and instead patiently defends the government. When he goes too far, Cheng calls in A-yi to be a witness when she forbids the man to ever return to her home again. Shortly after, Da De shows up at her home and Cheng boldly tells him to tell the government to stop with their stupid tricks. Da De, of course, feigns ignorance, but the game of pretending who Da De is has finished.



Part III: Chapter 16, The Death of Mao

Part III: Chapter 16, The Death of Mao Summary and Analysis

A number of people continue to show up on Cheng's doorstep, claiming to be Meiping's friend to trick Cheng into saying something against the Chinese government. She devises a scheme to allow A-yi to stay at her cousin's home in the evenings to avoid opening the door to these strangers. Cheng places a sign on her door telling visitors to leave her alone unless it is a matter from the Chinese government directly. When she finds her sign torn up, she asks the Zhus if they saw a burglar in the night and they make up a story about losing two shirts on their laundry line. Although Cheng knows that the Zhus have done the damage, she goes to the police to report suspicious behavior, not naming the Zhus.

After that, Hean's mother comes to visit her and Cheng realizes with horror that she is a spy for the government as well. However, Hean's mother is only doing it because she is forced to and tells Cheng that she thinks she will tell everyone she is too ill to visit Cheng anymore. Cheng appreciates the gesture and forgives her.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Hu comes to visit Cheng again. He proposes marriage to her, but citing a lifelong promise to her husband to remain faithful to him, she refuses. Since the refusal does not personally involve Mr. Hu, it helps him to save face and he is pleased.

Da De comes the next morning and asks to learn lessons from Emily Post's etiquette book. He believes he might be chosen as a diplomat to be stationed abroad. They have a nice dinner together when Cheng hands him quite a bit of money and he returns with wine, beer, fish, shrimp and chicken. When dinner is over, Da De encourages Cheng to give up the idea of ever having Meiping's suicide or her detention excused because it would constitute a senior official making a mistake, which will never happen.

Da De comes to visit and tells Cheng that he is engaged, but his new father-in-law to-be wants him to be an English teacher and give up his political ties. Once he becomes a teacher and is no longer affiliated with the Red Guards, Da De can bitterly tell her all the secrets he knows. He tells her that the murder of Meiping was an accident and the revolutionaries went a little too far. He refuses to tell her who was responsible, however. They have a dinner of scrambled eggs and Cheng makes a contribution to his upcoming wedding and Da De leaves, vowing that he cannot return for fear of being connected to someone so politically controversial. Before, when he was a Red Guard, his job was to spy on her, but now that he is a teacher, it does not do him any benefit to continue to see her.



Part III: Chapter 17, Rehabilitation

Part III: Chapter 17, Rehabilitation Summary and Analysis

Cheng waited for years for Mao to die. With his death, she has the hope that she will be able to petition for a visa to leave the country. She learns she will have to be in a parade with the Residents' Committee in a celebration against Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao who had always wanted all his power.

A man from the Public Security Bureau comes to visit Cheng in March of 1978. He rebukes her for sending so many petitions to inquire about Meiping's death. He asks her to stop writing so many petitions as the government is trying to get through the hundreds of thousands of cases of mysterious deaths during the time of Mao. Although he doesn't give her any information, she is reassured by the visits in knowing that her petitions have gotten to their destination.

Members of the studio where Meiping worked come to offer their condolences about her death to Cheng. Finally, in November of 1978, twelve years after Cheng's arrest, she receives an official notice that says she has been rehabilitated and a victim of wrongful arrest and persecution. Once this information becomes public, a memorial service for Meiping is finally allowed.

Cheng embraces her new status in society by going to the Public Security Bureau and requesting a visa to visit her sisters in the United States. She has written her sisters and saved their letter, inviting her to the United States to have a family reunion after suffering many years apart.



Part III: Chapter 18, Farewell to Shanghai

Part III: Chapter 18, Farewell to Shanghai Summary and Analysis

A few days after her passport application, Cheng receives a letter requesting that she come to a building to reclaim some of her goods that were taken from her during the Red Guards seize of her home. She is offered to be allowed to donate the pieces to the Shanghai Museum. She eventually accepts this agreement.

In February of 1980, Cheng wants to have a big celebration for what she hopes will be her last Chinese New Year in Shanghai. She invites a number of students and family over, including fireworks as part of the celebration. Cheng is aware that she might never see this country or celebrate this time again after she leaves for the United States. When questioned about why her Chinese New Year celebration was so over-the-top, Cheng merely replies that she was not only celebrating the New Year, but also China's success in Korea as well. To the very end, Cheng manages to stay a step ahead of anyone trying to pin her down for inappropriate behavior or actions in Chinese society.

Cheng receives her visa to visit the United States. Now, she has to get a visa from the U. S. Consulate, which she secures through a connection at a British bank, a risky move. She plans to leave China in autumn. In spite of all that has happened, she is sad to leave China as it is her homeland. The only people to see her off are a few women from the Federation of Women as she leaves in a steamer for Hong Kong. Although she has sailed from Shanghai many times in the past, this time she realizes it will be her last time and she is overcome with great sadness. She ends by saying she tried very hard to make China her own country, but utterly failed through no fault of her own.



Characters

Nien Cheng

The narrator and main character of the autobiography, Cheng is the strong driving force of her life. She does not allow the negative situations that are put upon her to break her spirit or will. Despite the seemingly insurmountable charges brought against her by the Chinese government, she never breaks down and confesses to trumped up charges against her interactions with foreign capitalists. Her home is ransacked by the Red Guards working on behalf of the Cultural Revolution, and she loses nearly all of her material goods, including precious goods and books.

Cheng does not confess to anything in the Detention House and eventually realizes she is a mere pawn in the Chinese government. Jiang Qing is using her possible confession as a way to demote another member of the political party, Chairman Zhou, in order to promote her own personal political gain. When Cheng does not confess, it frustrates the Chinese government constantly. Cheng suffers physical hardship in her detention, including a set of handcuffs that are kept on her body for days on end, permanently harming her hands and nearly killing her.

Cheng's entire life as she knows it is wholly changed once the Cultural Revolution starts. Her autobiography is not only a statement on the extraordinary life and determined resolve of Cheng, it also reflects on the tremendous changes that took place for the Chinese people once the Cultural Revolution began. Although she is a mere pawn in the chaotic political changes, Cheng's life is changed and terrorized relentlessly for the personal gain of someone she does not know, nor do they know her.

Cheng must endure physical and psychological torture while she is in the Detention House, while also keeping her sharp mind in order to not fall into any of the traps the Chinese authorities consistently put in front of her. If she slips and makes a mistake at any time, she will risk losing her status and her integrity, becoming condemned for something of which she is not guilty. No matter how many times the Chinese government tries to force her to confess that she is a spy giving foreign countries secrets about China while she worked for Shell Oil, she does not fall for their ruse. To top it off, her reward when she is released is a lower quality of life and the loss of her only child, her daughter.

In the end, Cheng's story is as much about the impact of the Cultural Revolution and political policies during the time of Mao as it is about the strength and resolve of a single woman living in China during these difficult and arduous times.

Chen-Ma

One of Cheng's most loyal servants, Chen-Ma has helped to raise Meiping and has been with the Cheng's for decades. She is reluctant to leave when the Red Guards are



on their way to destroy Cheng's home, although they all know it will be unpleasant and inevitable.

Chen-Ma represents the old lifestyle for Cheng. Although she is a servant, she is a family member and sees Meiping as if she were also her daughter. On Meiping's birthday, she goes to the Buddhist temple to help pray for the child's health and safety. It is on one of these trips that she sees the destruction that the Red Guards are starting to have on the community at large. Chen-ma is ultimately very loyal to the Cheng family in an age when the Red Guards can use the servants to report bad deeds by the household. When Cheng gets another servant after she is released from the detention house, she is warned that the new servant is nothing like Chen-ma.

Finally, Cheng contacts Chen-Ma's daughter to have her recover her mother and get her out of harm's way when the Red Guards arrive. She is a loyal and true servant for the Chengs and an integral part of their family life.

Meiping

Cheng's daughter, Meiping is a lovely woman who is also a film actress. Although she is intelligent enough to take on a number of different professions, she chose to be an actress for the Shanghai Film Studios. She lives in her own studio apartment at the time that Cheng is taken to the No. 1 Detention House by the Red Guards.

During Cheng's imprisonment, Meiping falls in love with a man and wants to marry him. Despite his pleas to move in with his family to enjoy more protection during the tumultuous political times, Meiping refuses and does not want to have the marriage ceremony until her mother has been released from the Detention House. Of course, Cheng does not know this information until well after her release years later.

Meiping is often pressured into writing a self-criticism against her upbringing and to criticize her mother. She refuses throughout Cheng's imprisonment. However, during one of these pressuring sessions, her captors kidnap her and take her to an abandoned building. It is here that they accidentally kill her. In order to cover up their accident, they publicize that Meiping committed suicide. It is not until years after Cheng's release that the truth is finally revealed, although Cheng has done her own research and finds out that her daughter was murdered.

Mr. Hu

A good friend of Cheng's husband before he died, Mr. Hu visits Cheng at the Chinese New Year every year to see how she is doing. After she is imprisoned for six and a half years, Mr. Hu's visits become more regular. He offers her any assistance she needs, including financial, which Cheng refuses. Mr. Hu proposes to Cheng, but she refuses, citing a promise to always be faithful to her husband. Despite the rejection, Mr. Hu continues to visit Cheng although he eventually distances himself from her.



Mrs. Zhu

After Cheng is released from the detention house, she is put in a two-bedroom section of a home. The Zhu family moves in downstairs a few weeks later and Mrs. Zhu tries to cause problems for Cheng. She and her family spy on Cheng and try to find fault with her actions in order to give the Chinese government a reason to incriminate her again.

A-yi

Cheng's servant after she is released from the detention house, A-yi is not as loyal as Chen-ma. However, over time Cheng's kind acts and charitable nature win over A-yi. Nevertheless, A-yi strictly reports everything that Cheng does back to the Chinese authorities.

Chairman Mao Zedong

The leader of China during the Cultural Revolution, Mao's impact on Cheng's life is tremendous. Through his political movements and paranoia, her entire world is changed and she ultimately loses nearly everything. His power struggles with his wife Jiang Qing and aggressive philosophical thoughts control an entire country and destroy its way of life.

Hean

Cheng's goddaughter, Hean is the only family member to greet Cheng when she is released from prison. Hean tells Cheng about Meiping and helps her settle into her new life after the detention house.

Winnie

One of Cheng's friends before the Cultural Revolution, Winnie has already suffered a great deal through the political changes since she is a teacher. Since Mao distrusts intellectuals who might scheme to underscore his efforts, Winnie spends most of her day writing big character posters rather than teaching and contributing to society in a meaningful way. When Cheng visits her after her release from prison, she is tormented by scleroma and her last words to Cheng are to leave China while she still has the opportunity.

Cheng's gardener

One of Cheng's servants before she is arrested, Cheng has money for all her servants before she leaves. She knows that her demise is inevitable and wants to make sure her servants are well taken care of. She has money for her gardener in her pocket when



she is taken to the detention house and uses this money to purchase necessary items while there. After her release, the gardener sees her at the market and helps to connect her with a number of people from her past.

Da De

Da De introduces himself as a mere student who wishes to learn English from Cheng. However, she quickly realizes he is a leader of the Red Guards sent to spy on her. Nevertheless, she uses this information to her advantage and forms a friendship with him. When he says he can no longer see her anymore because he has left the Red Guards to become an English teacher, she gives him money and he appears to be deeply touched by the gesture.



Objects/Places

Cheng's home before the Cultural Revolution

At the start of the novel, Cheng enjoys a lifestyle unlike that of the rest of the Chinese population. Thanks to her husband's employment with Shell Oil and her position as an assistant to the manager after his death, she enjoys a luxurious lifestyle with many Western comforts, including teas and coffee that the rest of China does not have. Her home and wealth symbolize all that is bad in Chinese society to the Cultural Revolution and its Red Guards.

Cheng's home after prison

Although her living conditions are better than the prison cell she had, Cheng is given only the upstairs two-bedroom portion of a home. However, for a single woman living with a servant, her living accommodations are still much greater than what the rest of China has. She is given special accommodations after her detention sentence by the Chinese government because they feel she cannot live without her servants and that she is mortally ill with uterine cancer at the time of her release.

No. 1 Detention House

After Cheng refuses to confess to a crime she did not commit, she is forcibly taken to the No. 1 Detention House. She will live there for six and a half years in a compound specifically reserved for political prisoners.

Handcuffs

Cheng consistently refuses to confess to a crime of being an imperialist spy. At one point during the end of her tenure in the detention house, handcuffs are placed on Cheng's wrists behind her back too tightly and left on for days. Although it nearly kills her, she somehow manages to survive.

Meiping's jacket

After years in the harsh detention cell, Cheng's winter coat has fallen to pieces. She requests permission to buy a new winter jacket and is eventually brought a packet of her daughter Meiping's clothing. The clothes look in the same condition they were in when she left them with Meiping years ago and this is Cheng's first real indication that Meiping is dead.



Nanjing Road

The road where Cheng must visit to learn the truth about Meiping's death. Although officially called a suicide, Cheng learns that there was scaffolding on Nanjing Road and it would have been impossible for her to commit suicide. Murder is then the only real answer.

Shanghai Museum

After Cheng's release, the Shanghai Museum contacts her to request that many of her invaluable china pieces be purchased and put on their displays. Since Cheng has no one to pass the pieces on to as Meiping is dead and she is planning to leave China forever, she reluctantly agrees.

Struggle Meetings

These political rallies were specifically against a person thought to be an enemy of the government. Cheng's first struggle meeting is for a man named Tao from the Shell Oil company, but they will eventually hold rallies against her as well in an effort to get her to confess a false crime.

Big Character Posters

Many of the skilled laborers in Mao's society are forced to write big character posters denouncing other neighbors, family members and friends rather than perform their career duties. They will spend hours making these large posters and making a high number of them in order to look loyal and devout to Mao rather than spending time at their employed profession.

Back Door policies

After Cheng is released from prison, another form of bartering exists. Called the back door policy, you can avoid standing in long lines to see the doctor, dentist or even purchasing food by knowing someone special and doing a unique favor for them. This is how goods and services are traded after the Cultural Revolution ends.



Themes

Persistence

The trials that Nien Cheng faces during the Cultural Revolution are tremendous. At any time, she could have easily lost her resolve and determination. She could have confessed to being a spy for the British government. This confession was all that Jiang Qing needed to help with her political power play (although Cheng is unaware of this until much later) and Cheng would have been relieved of much of the torment she was under.

By asserting herself and keeping her mind sharp, Cheng not only did not confess to any of the false crimes accused against her; she also does not fall into any of the slippery traps that the Chinese government and her interrogators set for her throughout the six and a half years of imprisonment. Arguably, her most difficult punishment was the handcuffs that remained on her wrists for days on end, nearly killing her. Even this extreme torture, however, did not break Cheng, and she is able to survive while keeping her integrity and good name intact.

Cheng put up the fight against the Chinese government until the very end. Even on the day of her release, she refuses to walk out the door until she is reassured that a statement will be printed in the newspaper citing that a mistake was made and she was imprisoned under a false charge. The interrogator, flabbergasted, refuses her request and she is dragged out the door. It will not be until years later that her name is cleared.

Political Power

The impact of political movements in China is tremendous. This period of time that the autobiography covers is a particularly volatile point in Chinese history. During the reign of Mao, there are numerous political changes and movements that significantly alter the lifestyles of every member in Chinese society.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao does not care for intellectuals. He feels they will undermine his efforts and for this reason, diminishes their role in society. He rewards persons whose political allegiance cannot be questioned, putting them in roles that were previously held by trained professionals. Cheng suffers the results of this decision by Mao when she is in the detention house and needs medical care. Because of Mao's distrust for intellectuals, the man assigned to be her doctor has no professional training and misdiagnoses her. In addition, he cannot even take her blood without hurting her.

In this way, Mao's Cultural Revolution is more of a response to his paranoia than a true path towards improving Chinese society. By fearing intellectuals, he brings the quality of life down in Chinese culture by "reeducating" the intellectuals and professionals by making them work in the fields in the country. Conversely, people with no training and few skills are brought in to do specialized jobs. Coupled with this reordering of



professions, Mao removes literature from the shelves and leaves only his own publications. The Chinese people are not permitted to read anything other than his book of quotations and a copy of the book is expected to be with them at all times.

Justice

Throughout Cheng's time of imprisonment, she has few things to motivate her. Each week is filled with more interrogations and false accusations about the role she played while working at Shell and her involvement as an alleged foreign spy. However, Cheng continues to maintain her innocence throughout the entire ordeal.

One of Cheng's motivations during the six and a half years of imprisonment is her sense of justice. She keeps her mind sharp throughout the interrogations and never gives the guards any reason to find fault with her. When they hand her a piece of paper that has "Signature of Criminal" at the bottom, she checks her initial reaction to mark through these words and instead writes "who has committed no crime" afterward to play a game with the Maoists. She wants to be seen as passive, stoic and steadfast rather than aggressive or defensive. In this way, she steadily maneuvers through a world of political schemes and tricks to get her to admit anything amiss in her life to justify her imprisonment. Cheng's well-defined sense of justice is what helps her navigate through these dangerous waters successfully.

When Cheng is released from prison, she demands a formal declaration of her false imprisonment. It will not be until years later than she gets her wish. However, when she learns that her daughter Meiping has died under mysterious circumstances, she takes her daughter's cause up as well. Not only does she fight for her own innocence, but she wants to clear the name of her daughter and show that she did not commit suicide, but was in fact murdered.



Style

Perspective

The autobiography is written from the point of view of Cheng. The entire novel stays with her perspective and outside commentary from other key characters during this period of her life are never brought in. For this reason, we can only know what happened to Cheng from how she relates it. Considering the social and political environment at the time, it would be nearly impossible to find an honest depiction of this time period from anyone in her life during the Cultural Revolution.

Cheng's perspective is an important one for the novel. By keeping her perspective throughout the novel, the reader gets a better understanding of her motivations, feelings and emotions. After all, it is difficult to understand how anyone could endure losing everything in her life due to a false imprisonment charge and becoming the pawn of a political person like Jiang Qing and still remain sharp and positive. As each event occurs, the reader can see what Cheng is doing to stay positive or why she has reacted in the manner she has in order to gain a better understanding of her as a person.

Tone

The tone of the novel is generally upbeat, despite the events that unfold. Cheng says that she is generally a positive and happy person. No matter what happens to her, Cheng works hard to stay mentally alert and fit throughout her imprisonment. She will perform mental and physical exercises in an effort to remain calm and positive. It is her positive attitude that she attributes as the reason why and how she survived all the years in prison and in the consequent environment after her release.

Cheng's depiction of the events that happened to her during the Cultural Revolution are told in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner. She does not embellish any of the situations nor does she use metaphors or hyperbole to dramatize what is happening to her.

Structure

Cheng narrates the autobiography in a linear fashion. She tells the events as they occur. Occasionally, she will give additional information about what was occurring in the political situation at the time of her events in order to give a better perspective of the situation at hand. However, more often, the reader will be engaged in the events as they are happening to Cheng. In this way, the reader feels the desperation and pain during her imprisonment or shares other emotions at various points in the novel.

The end of the novel leaves Cheng in the United States, which is where she lived for the remainder of her life. The reader can travel the full length of the events that led up to the

Cultural Revolution, her imprisonment and the unsteady environment that Cheng was released into after six and a half years.



Quotes

"In the end, this policy paid off, because during the Cultural Revolution, when my friends and relatives were cross-examined, they could honestly say that I never showed any interest in state secrets." p. 165

"But could a man assigned to carry night soil as his lifelong occupation make himself like the job by working hard at it?" p. 33

"...a new slogan was coined to emphasize the undesirability of children of capitalist families. It said 'A dragon is born of a dragon, a phoenix is born of a phoenix, and a mouse is born with the ability to make a hole in the wall.' In short, since the parents were class enemies, the children would naturally be class enemies too." p. 115

"Although her position in the bureaucratic structure could not have been very senior, the power she was allowed to exercise seemed frighteningly enormous." p. 503

"For so many years I had waited for Mao to die. When I was in prison, I was desperate enough to pray for it to happen. Now that he had really died, I did not know how to proceed." p. 479

"Why do you think people want to get involved in political struggles? To get better jobs, of course. And better jobs mean better living conditions and more pay. There is no way one can get ahead in China except through taking part in political struggles." p. 477

"To have received a marriage proposal from a worthy man at the age of sixty was pleasant, if not exhilarating." p. 454

"The sum total of the accusations was an amateurish attempt at a spy drama without a convincing central theme, beginning, or end." p. 254

"Through the opening, I could see only a pair of black leather boots and the lower part of the uniformed body of an air force officer, not his face or head. But I pictured him in my mind's eye as having what we Chinese call a villain's face with 'horizontal flesh.' We believe a man's face reflects the life he has led, so a wicked man would end up having an unpleasant face with 'horizontal flesh.'" p. 183

"I was astonished. Any ignoramus with no special medical knowledge would know I had bronchitis, possibly verging on pneumonia, not hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver with symptoms entirely different from mine. What sort of 'doctor' was this young man? ... I realized he was not a trained doctor at all but had been given the job because Mao Zedong had said, 'We must learn swimming from swimming' when referring to appointing unskilled workers who were politically reliable to do technical job." p. 190

"No, Mommy, no one will be allowed to have a home like we had again..." p. 93

"Don't lose heart! Surely they will do something when the time comes. I love China! I love my country even though it is not always good or right..." p. 95



Topics for Discussion

Name some of the accusations the Red Guards and the Chinese government make against Cheng. How does she respond to these accusations?

Physical and mental anguish play important roles during Cheng's imprisonment. Name some of the torments she suffers and how she overcomes them.

Cheng says she does not fear death because as a Chinese woman, she sees herself as a member of a long line of her mothers and daughters. Do you think this feeling has changed with Meiping's death?

What are some of the compelling pieces of evidence that prove without a doubt that Meiping did not commit suicide?

What are some of the activities that Cheng did while in prison to remain mentally sharp and alert?

The doctor that visits Cheng in the detention house was actually a peasant with no medical training. How did he get there? What does the expression "learn swimming while swimming" mean and how does it apply here?

How does Mao feel about intellectuals? Why do you think the political movement is called the Cultural Revolution?

Discuss Cheng's sense of justice. Do you think it helped or harmed her throughout her imprisonment?

What role did struggle meetings have for the Chinese people? Were they effective? How are they a good representation of the political power and movement at the time?