

Obituaries

Anna Chennault, secret Nixon envoy and Washington figure of ‘glamour and mystery,’ dies at 94

By **Matt Schudel** April 3

Anna Chennault, a Chinese-born writer and business executive who married a storied American general and became a Washington hostess, Republican Party activist and secret emissary for candidate Richard M. Nixon during the 1968 presidential campaign, died March 30 at her home in Washington. She was 94.

She had complications from a recent stroke, said her daughter, Cynthia Chennault.

Mrs. Chennault (pronounced shuh-NAWLT) gained international fame in 1947, when she married a swashbuckling World War II hero, Maj. Gen. Claire L. Chennault, in Shanghai. At the beginning of the war, he organized the [Flying Tigers](#), a volunteer group of American airmen in China, then a U.S. ally.

Her marriage to the general, three decades her senior, put Mrs. Chennault at the center of Asian and U.S. diplomatic, military and commercial circles, and she became a leading figure in the “China lobby,” supporting the efforts of nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek to establish an anti-communist government on Taiwan in opposition to Mao Zedong’s People’s Republic of China.

After her husband’s death in 1958, Mrs. Chennault settled in Washington, where she became a formidable presence and “a figure of glamour and mystery in the Nation’s Capital,” as Washington Post columnist Maxine Cheshire put it. She soon became a top fundraiser for the Republican Party — but kept her ears and doors open to people across political and international borders.

“In Washington you can disagree,” she told The Post in 1970. “But you must not be disagreeable.”

Mrs. Chennault led a stylish life, with a chauffeur, a chef and a wardrobe of clothes she designed herself. Dinner parties at her penthouse apartment in the Watergate complex were attended by so many power brokers that she was called “the next Perle Mesta,” after the renowned Washington “hostess with the mostest” who became an ambassador and was the inspiration for characters on the stage and in film. (Mesta even attended Mrs. Chennault’s gatherings.)

“Her career represents a unique model of an informal diplomat,” Mrs. Chennault’s biographer, [Catherine Forslund](#), a history professor at Rockford University in Illinois, said in an interview. “She was somebody who interpreted China to Americans, government officials, businesses and the public, to a certain extent. Plus, she interpreted the United States to all these Asian countries.”

Throughout almost 60 years of widowhood, Mrs. Chennault faithfully kept alive the memory of her husband, a rakish pilot and military officer she always referred to as “General Chennault.” The Flying Tigers, known for the distinctive shark-teeth design painted on the fuselage of their P-40 fighters, carried out aerial battles against Japanese planes in the early stages of World War II.

Later, as a two-star general, Claire Chennault commanded the U.S. 14th Air Force in Kunming, China, where young Anna Chan, as she was then known, met him as a war correspondent.

At the end of the war, Claire Chennault co-founded an air-cargo company called Civil Air Transport. After his death, the company was purchased by the CIA and renamed [Air America](#), which operated largely without public oversight into the 1970s.

Mrs. Chennault, in the meantime, built a career in Washington as a consultant to aerospace companies and military leaders in the United States and Asia. She became a vice president of a separate air-cargo company, the Flying Tiger Line, and negotiated landing rights and other business agreements throughout Asia. The company was eventually sold to Federal Express.

“She knew all the heads of every air force in Asia,” said Forslund, whose biography of Mrs. Chennault was published in 2002. “She had a very high level of discretion.”

When a Post reporter once asked directly whether she had any involvement with the CIA, Mrs. Chennault’s reply was a terse “No comment.”

She shared strong anti-communist sympathies with Nixon, who became one of her political patrons. Mrs. Chennault, the vice chairman of the Republican National Finance Committee, was the leading female fundraiser for Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign.

“I don’t accept less than \$500,” she said at the time.

In the weeks before the 1968 election, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced plans to suspend U.S. bombing of North Vietnam as an attempt to jump-start peace talks in Paris. Nixon feared that an agreement to end the Vietnam War could tip the election to the Democratic nominee, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey.

Nixon’s campaign asked Mrs. Chennault to approach South Vietnamese officials with a request to delay or abandon the negotiations in Paris, in an effort to thwart Humphrey.

“Hold on,” she said to South Vietnam’s ambassador to the United States, relaying a message from Nixon’s campaign. “We are gonna win.”

The back-channel meeting was wiretapped by the FBI, and a furious Johnson listened to Mrs. Chennault's message.

"This is treason," the president told Senate Minority Leader Everett M. Dirksen (R-Ill.), referring to the apparent efforts to interfere with U.S. diplomacy.

Johnson said nothing in public at the time, Nixon won the election, and the war in Vietnam dragged on until 1975, when the United States abandoned its embassy in Saigon.

Within weeks, details of the covert arrangement, which became known as the "Chennault affair," began to leak to the press. At first, Mrs. Chennault called the story "an insult to my intellect," yet in her 1980 autobiography, "[The Education of Anna](#)," she admitted that she had made overtures to the South Vietnamese on Nixon's behalf.

Until his death in 1994, Nixon denied that he did anything to sabotage the peace talks. His direct role in the Chennault affair was confirmed when biographer John A. Farrell uncovered notes written by Nixon aide [H.R. "Bob" Haldeman](#) that were "kept secret by Nixon and his lawyers for decades," according to Farrell's 2017 biography, "[Richard Nixon: The Life](#)."

Among other things, Haldeman's notes revealed that Nixon called Mrs. Chennault "Dragon Lady" in private. They also showed that her clandestine mission to the South Vietnamese was directly ordered by Nixon, in possible violation of U.S. law.

"There's really no doubt this was a step beyond the normal political jockeying," Farrell told the New York Times in 2017. "Potentially, this is worse than anything he did in Watergate," referring to the political scandal that grew out of wiretapping the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate office complex and led to Nixon's resignation in 1974.

Mrs. Chennault had hoped her loyalty would be rewarded with an ambassadorship or a major post in the Nixon administration. She was offered nothing. According to Forslund, Nixon was reluctant to nominate her for a job requiring Senate confirmation, concerned that she might divulge campaign subterfuge under oath.

Chen Xiangmei was born June 25, 1923, in Beijing, the second of six sisters. (Her date of birth is usually given as 1925, but her daughter confirmed that she was two years older than often reported.) Her name, formerly transliterated as Chan Sheng Mai, means Plum Blossom.

Her father was an Oxford-educated law professor and diplomat; her mother, who was also from a prominent family, died in the late 1930s. The family moved to Hong Kong in 1937, soon after war broke out between China and Japan.

Anna Chan, as she was known in English, graduated from Hong Kong's Lingnan University in 1944. While working for a Chinese news organization, she met [Chennault](#), who was nicknamed "Old Leatherface." They settled in Taiwan soon after their marriage.

Widowed at 35, Mrs. Chennault moved to Washington with her two daughters and became a U.S. citizen. She worked for a translation service at Georgetown University and later for Voice of America. She helped edit Chinese-English dictionaries and, in 1962, published the first of many books, the best-selling "[A Thousand Springs: The Biography of a Marriage](#)."

Mrs. Chennault received her first presidential appointment from President John F. Kennedy, helping resettle Chinese refugees, and served on various presidential commissions through the administration of President Bill Clinton. She established scholarships and academic fellowship programs in China and the United States.

For years, she was romantically linked to her longtime public escort, Thomas G. “Tommy the Cork” Corcoran, a lawyer and onetime aide to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had helped Claire Chennault gain permission to form the Flying Tigers. Corcoran [died in 1981](#).

Mrs. Chennault never remarried, telling friends that she wanted to be buried beside her husband in Arlington National Cemetery.

Survivors include two daughters, Cynthia Chennault of Gainesville, Fla., and Claire Anna Chennault of Rockville, Md.; three sisters; and two grandsons.

Mrs. Chennault once owned a Chinese restaurant in Washington with syndicated columnist [Jack Anderson](#) — who nevertheless wrote about her secretive role in the Nixon campaign. She helped establish the private George Towne Club with, among others, South Korean lobbyist Tongsun Park, who was later charged with bribing members of Congress. Mrs. Chennault was not implicated in the scandal.

As a longtime opponent of the communist regime in her homeland, Mrs. Chennault felt betrayed when Nixon visited China in 1972 and when President Jimmy Carter established full diplomatic relations in 1979. But, seeing a new opportunity to bring her two worlds together, she visited the Chinese mainland in 1981 for the first time in 33 years. She later organized one of the first groups of Taiwanese business executives to visit the People’s Republic of China. She last visited the land of her birth in 2015.

During a meeting in the 1980s with Chinese leader [Deng Xiaoping](#), Mrs. Chennault said he asked, “Why do all the so-called China experts have blue eyes and blond hair?”

It was a question that long rankled Mrs. Chennault, especially as she grew more frustrated with diplomats and lawmakers who never offered her a major policymaking role — but kept attending her parties.

“I am not a hostess,” she told People magazine in 1981. “For years I have despised that description. Why don’t people recognize me as a China expert?”

Read more [Washington Post obituaries](#)

[Steven Bochco, whose series ‘Hill Street Blues’ transformed television, dies at 74](#)

[Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, South Africa’s ‘Mother of the Nation,’ dies at 81](#)

[Michael Tree, violist who co-founded the influential Guarneri Quartet, dies at 84](#)

 **100 Comments**

Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida.  Follow @MattSchudel