She was imprisoned and raped during the Cultural Revolution.

She was deported for exposing the death of baby girls owing to China's one-child policy.

She arrived in America with $80 and three words of English.

Now she's a technology millionaire and friend of the Obamas.

This is the story of a woman called Ping Fu

INTERVIEW Helena de Bertodano

Ping Fu with Michelle and Barack Obama at the State of the Union address in 2010

From left: Ping Fu as a child in China with her real, 'Nanjing Mother', left, and her 'Shanghai Mama', actually her aunt; Ping, right, with her best friend Li, centre, and Li's older sister; Ping Fu today in her North Carolina home

When Michelle Obama invited Ping Fu to the White House for a nightcap after her husband's 2010 State of the Union address, Ping panicked. "I didn't understand what this word nightcap means. I thought she was asking me for a sleepover."

Ping, 54, one of America's most successful digital entrepreneurs, who arrived in the US as a penniless exile 28 years ago, throws back her head and laughs. This utter naivety, teamed with the most ferocious intellect, makes Ping unusually captivating. We meet in her spacious home in North Carolina. Ping is funkily dressed in a short black chiffon dress, floral tights and 6in wedge heels, her electric blue hair glinting in the sunlight shafting through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Her company Geomagic, a 3-D software development company, has an annual turnover of $45 million, but she is not your normal geeky Silicon Valley CEO. And she is the first to find the gaps in her knowledge hysterically funny.

"I told Michelle I needed to call my hotel if I wasn't coming back. She said, 'Oh, a nightcap just means I am inviting you up for a drink.' So I went up with her. She was very personable and charming. We talked about my life."

It must have been a long nightcap. The life of Ping Fu is not easily summarised and Michelle Obama no doubt listened in amazement as she heard the extraordinary story of this unassuming woman.

Born in Nanjing, China, the first few years of Ping's life were idyllic. Raised in a beautiful villa in Shanghai by a loving aunt and uncle – whom she believed to be her parents – and doted on by older "siblings", Ping would accompany her "mother" everywhere, clinging to her legs as she prepared huge dinners every night. "My favourite dish was crabmeat with ginkgo nuts in mint mango sauce," she writes in her memoir, *Bend, Not Break*, in which she conjures up an image of early domestic bliss. Every morning her "mother" would buy jasmine flower buds from the market to pin to her daughters' blouses, "so that we always carried a sweet fragrance with us". Every evening when her "father" came home from work, her "mother" would run out to greet him. "I liked to... spy on them in the courtyard below, hugging and kissing... Theirs was the happiest marriage I have ever known." At night, Ping would often climb into their bed to snuggle up with them.

Ping turned 8 in May 1966, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution set in motion by Mao Zedong to enforce Communism throughout China by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from society. Anyone deemed bourgeois – which included Ping's educated, well-to-do family – needed to be "re-educated". Her "father" was arrested and her "brothers" sent off to forced labour camps. One of Mao's requirements was that everyone had to return to the city of their birth. Inevitably, the Red Guard came for Ping. "This woman is not your mother," they told the bewildered little girl, who was screaming at her "mother" to contradict them. "I was just dragged from home," she says today, tears springing readily to her eyes. Ping finally understood that the "aunt" she had sometimes visited in Nanjing was her real mother, who had sent her to Shanghai to be raised by her sister. To differentiate between them, she calls them Shanghai Mama and Nanjing Mother.

> The Red Guard came for Ping. 'This woman is not your mother,' they told the bewildered little girl. 'I was just dragged from home'

The Red Guard put her on a train "home", but on arrival at Nanjing, instead of going to her birth parents, who she discovered were also being re-educated, Ping was sent to a dormitory of "lost" children. Pushed into a barren room, she found another girl weeping on the concrete floor.

"If I close my eyes," says Ping with an almost imperceptible shudder, "I can still see every corner of that room – the mice climbing up the wall; the water basin, like a trough, outside; the door hung sideways. Later, I realised it was broken on purpose so we didn't have privacy."

Ping recognised the girl as Hong, her four-year-old "cousin", who she realised must be her birth sister. The girl clung to her, racked with sobs. "Bubbles of snot blew out of her nose. Her voice had gone raw, but she wouldn't stop crying," she writes, adding poignantly, "It probably didn't strike me then, but in the course of one day I had not only lost the mother I loved and the mother who had given birth to me; I had also become a mother myself."

For the next ten years, Room 202 was their home – denounced as "black elements", all the children were brainwashed into believing they had been "saved". At times they were forced to wear chalkboards round their necks, listing the "crimes" of their families and to stand on stage in front of a packed auditorium and publicly denounce their parents. If they didn't, they were struck. "Eventually," Ping writes, "I started to believe what I said onstage. I was nobody."

Shortly after they arrived, they were made to watch as the Red Guard executed two teachers, dropping one headfirst down a well. "The other," Ping has said in the past, "was tied on four horses and torn apart and we saw her guts falling out – it was gruesome. We were told that if we ever did anything bad, that's how we would end up."

Sometimes they themselves were subjected to brutality. One day a Red Guard threw Hong in a nearby river and she would have drowned if Ping, then 10, hadn't jumped in to rescue her. On their way back to their room, both soaking wet, they were followed by a gang of about ten teenage boys. Her sister escaped but Ping was attacked and gang-raped. "They cut me up and left me to die," she says, almost matter-of-factly. In her book, she describes what happened in more detail. "For a few nightmarish moments, all I could do was feel the boys cutting my clothes off, the knife ripping into my armpit and my bare stomach, and the pain of something blunt pressing between my legs. I lost consciousness." Somehow she survived, only to endure emotional abuse afterwards. "I was called Broken Shoe [a Chinese phrase for a fallen woman]. That was the worst time," says Ping, who still speaks with a strong Chinese accent. "It was not the rape itself, because I didn't understand that. It was being a victim and then being punished for that." She struggles for words: "I had nobody to turn to."

Her sister kept her going. "My responsibility for her kept me alive... I wanted to give up but I had no choice." At times, Ping speaks with a curious sense of detachment, almost as though she is describing the life of somebody else, not her own. In her book she describes how, as a child, she blocked out the physical noise of machine-gun fire and the mega speakers broadcasting Communist propaganda. "I can still shut down my hearing at will to this day," she writes. It seems that she has managed to block out some of the emotional noise as well. But sometimes it seeps through – she talks very intensely, her hands often clasped as if in prayer. "Most of the time it feels real and awful," says Ping. "I try very hard not to break down and cry, not always successfully."

She says that after she was ripped from her Shanghai family, her new circumstances took a while to sink in. "Initially you get this shock that blocks your emotion. Then it comes back in waves, with increasing intensity. It took me a long time to realise that I was not going home – when I did realise, it was hard to take."

Her Nanjing Mother returned when Ping was 13 and moved in to Room 202. "She was not the mother I expected her to be," says Ping. "She does not have a loving nature."

In the past, Ping has described how her mother used to physically hurt her, usually ➡

PREVIOUS SPREAD: OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA. THIS PAGE: MIKE MCGREGOR

by pinching her. In the book, one of the most moving passages is when her mother forces her to kill her pet chicken for a dinner she's hosting. Later, she informs her daughters that she never wanted children.

It's clear that the effects of this estrangement linger, even though Nanjing Mother now lives with Ping. "She is up there somewhere," says Ping, pointing towards the rooms overhead. "Even if you don't have a past, it's pretty hard to live with your mother. I had to work through my issues with her." Eighteen years ago, on her first visit back to China to see her family, Ping decided to confront her mother. "I had so much pent-up anger and also nostalgia about home. In America I had consulted a psychologist and he said, 'You have to confront your mother.' Of course, he didn't understand Chinese culture about family boundaries and respectability. I took the American 'jingo' back to China and it was not very well received. I was not mature enough to understand her troubles. In retrospect it was just a horrible thing to do. The last thing my mother wanted was to see a lost daughter come home and confront her. But at the same time I so wanted her to say, 'Sorry,' and 'I love you.'

Ping is at her most emotional when she describes her Shanghai Mama's decline. "I was so sad when my Shanghai Mama died. I couldn't do anything for her. When I saw her in hospital, it broke my heart. She was pulling at my arm and saying, 'Ping, please bring me home, I want to be home…' But [I couldn't] and her own children couldn't take care of her, they were all working… Now I don't want to have any regrets about my Nanjing Mother. I want her to have a better life. Both her daughters are in America [Hong now lives in Arizona, where she has a retail business]. It's not all for her; it's also for me. What I appreciate in my Nanjing Mother is that she has always had this blind faith in my ability to do anything, even when I was a child."

That faith was not misplaced. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, schools reopened and Ping, then 18, threw herself into her studies, winning a place at one of the country's few universities. As a literature student, she became interested in journalism and a professor suggested she write about China's one-child policy. Her meticulous report, filed after months interviewing doctors, mothers and midwives, documented the widespread killing of baby girls. "I witnessed the horrifying consequences with my own eyes," she writes. "Female infants drowned in rivers and lakes; baby girls suffocated in plastic bags and tossed into garbage bins." The report was picked up by Shanghai's largest newspaper and attracted international attention, becoming a human-rights scandal. Although Ping's name was not on the article, it was traced back to her.

She was arrested. "I thought I was going to be executed and I was really depressed because I actually liked my life now. At the same time I felt ready, because my sister had grown up. It wasn't scary. I was just sad that my life was going to end so abruptly."

In fact, when she was brought out of her cell three days later, she was released, but told she must leave China. She decided to go to America. "I had an illusional view of America. My cousin told me it was a place where you step on watermelons, hit your head on bananas and when you fall you have a mouthful of peanuts." The excitement of the trip gleams in her eyes even today. Ping landed in America with $80 for her fare to Albuquerque and only three English phrases: "thank you", "hello" and "help". "Help" proved immediately useful. On arrival at Albuquerque airport, she was kidnapped by a man who offered her a lift to the university, but then locked her in his home and left. Three days later, neighbours contacted the police when they heard her

'I thought I was going to be executed and I was really depressed because I liked my life now. At the same time I felt ready'

calling for help. "It could only happen to me," says Ping, laughing at herself today.

She enrolled in English as a Foreign Language classes and supported herself by working as a babysitter, cleaner and waitress. Later she switched to computer science and started working for a start-up software design company while completing her studies. While studying for a doctorate at the University of Illinois, she fell in love with a professor named Herbert Edelsbrunner. "This was the man I wanted to spend my life with," she writes. They married and had a daughter, Xixi, now 19. Ping later switched to the National Centre for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), a hothouse of brilliant computer scientists working in the fields of virtual reality, image processing and scientific visualisation. As part of her work, Ping helped develop the special effects for the movie *Terminator 2*.

Encouraged by her employers, she decided to start her own business with her husband. Combining the 3-D imaging technology she had helped to develop at NCSA and Edelsbrunner's mathematical formulations, they founded Geomagic – capturing images and turning them into 3-D print-outs that become moulds and prototypes. They were heady days, on a par with her early life in Shanghai.

In time, her company became so successful that in 2010, when the White House called a meeting of 50 CEOs to pick their brains on business strategies, Ping was invited.

"Obama saw the initial list [which did not include Ping] and said, 'I want diversity, women entrepreneurs, first-generation immigrants, a woman in technology, someone from a minority.' I ticked all the boxes. So they came to me."

At the meeting, Obama asked the CEOs how they inspired their employees. "The other CEOs all had very articulate theories," says Ping. "I said, 'I like to tell stories: you have two people laying bricks and you ask the first person what he is doing and he says, "I'm laying bricks." You ask the second person and he says, "I am building a cathedral." The [second person] is excited about his job and knows what the end game is.' Afterwards, when the meeting was documented, they quoted me. They didn't quote Eric Schmidt [executive chairman of Google]. They quoted this person, nobody knows who she is. So that got me quite known."

She obviously made an impression on Obama, because no sooner had she returned home than she got a call from the White House inviting her to sit in the First Lady's box for the State of the Union address. "I had no idea how big this is. I had a board meeting the same day and everyone told me to cancel it, but I wouldn't. Then everyone said, 'Are you shopping for something to wear?' And I said, 'Why? I have clothes.'"

She ended up making the event just in time, wearing a black suit and "very colourful ice-cream cone jewellery" that her teenage daughter made for her. It was after this evening that Michelle invited her back to the White House for the nightcap. Later, she was asked to be on the first presidential National Advisory Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship, a group that meets with Obama to help develop policies to support innovation.

She also accompanied Hillary Clinton to an APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit. I ask her whether she liked Clinton. "I'm really admiring her for her intellect," says Ping carefully. "She is always on top of her job. I think she is like my Nanjing Mother and Michelle [Obama] is like my Shanghai Mama. One is intelligent and efficient and one is warm and personable." She describes the Obamas' relationship in similar terms: "You can see they have an authentic, loving relationship. They so much remind me of my Shanghai Mama and Papa."

Amid all the excitement of the past few years, there has also been sadness. In 2008, after 17 years of marriage, her husband ➡

announced he was leaving her for someone else. "It came out of the blue," says Ping today, still sounding hurt and shell-shocked. "I didn't have any preparation."

Edelsbrunner has now remarried. I ask Ping if she thinks she ever will. "I absolutely want to find love," says Ping earnestly. "Marriage itself doesn't matter because I'm not going to have more children. What's important is to share your life with someone. At the moment I don't have time so that makes relationships very difficult. But I'm open-minded. If anyone likes me, I'm [sic] welcome." She erupts in peals of laughter.

And would she return to China? Ping says that she feels "more loyalty to America because it changed my life", and her words suggest that her feelings towards her motherland are still raw. "China has thousands of years of history. My 25 years there is just a blip. I cannot just take my misery and project that on to the entire country... I have had to become more mature and be in a better place to understand that, because [at first] you do have an anger for that kind of experience. [China] robbed me of my childhood and it abused me."

When she does go back to China, she is monitored. "I am on the watch list. I have these black marks in my file – anti-socialism, anti-communism, anti-stability, anti-whatever... I would love to see a burning ceremony of my whole entire black file," she says, alluding to an event in her childhood when the Red Army burnt her private journals.

"Last year when I was there, I got a call from the White House. Within five minutes, I couldn't get e-mails, my mobile did not work. I asked to use my cousin's phone but [the minute] it was in my hand it didn't work. I changed my ticket and left that day. It is spooky."

She is a supporter of Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist and activist who was detained last year by the Chinese authorities. "My friend asked me to convince him to come to the US, so I called him before he was arrested and he said, 'Don't call me,' because he knew he was being followed."

I ask Ping if she is ever concerned that her actions could have repercussions for her family living in China. "That could happen if I did anything to embarrass the country. But I don't have any intention of doing that." What about her book, though, which graphically describes the abuse she endured? "I think the book is probably not so welcome, but I don't think it's going to get me into trouble. There are many books that are more controversial than mine."

In fact, says Ping, for the first time in her life she feels that she can relax. "I've always been in overdrive. Now I feel like I've arrived. I was nobody and I always wanted to be somebody." She smiles: "I don't feel I'm nobody any more." ■

'I TRIED TO CONVINCE MYSELF THAT MY DEATH WOULD BE PAINLESS'

One day in the autumn of 1982, as I innocently walked across the campus of Suzhou University, making preparations for graduation, someone sneaked up behind me, jammed a black canvas bag over my head, and bound my wrists together tightly. "Don't scream," a menacing male voice whispered as I was escorted into a nearby car.

We drove for hours. I had no idea what was going on, as I knew nothing of the international human rights pressure on China that had been traced back to my thesis. I did not ask any questions either, as I had learnt never to make inquiries in China, especially when the police were involved. I simply remained silent as my mind raced, trying to guess what had gone wrong. The only thing I could think of was that the black mark in my personal file from my days at the Red Maple Society [the university's literary group] had caught up with me.

Eventually, we arrived at our destination. I was taken from the car and deposited in a pitch-black windowless room. My hood was removed, but my wrists were left bound together in front of me. I heard the door close behind me. The stench of human excrement mixed with ammonia made me gag. I shuffled on hands and knees across the concrete floor, exploring my prison. All I found was a thin mattress and a bucket, which I presumed would serve as my toilet. After what might have been many minutes or several hours, someone gave me a container of water and untied my hands. I received no food, but I did not feel hungry; my stomach churned with acid and fear.

The government officials did not beat me or even interrogate me. They ignored me completely. I was not given any information about why or for how long I was being held captive. The unknown was intolerable. I couldn't sleep. I could barely breathe. My mind started filling the darkness with vivid replays of the struggle sessions at NUAA [Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics], the rape, the burning of my journals, the murder of teachers and black elements. I tried to convince myself that my death would be quick and painless. I no longer had the responsibility of raising my little sister, so I could go. And yet it seemed cruel that I should meet with my end now, when I had survived the worst of the Cultural Revolution and finally had a chance at an education.

I lost track of time in the darkness. After what I later found out was three days, I had fallen asleep at last, so it startled me when the door to my cell slammed open. "Get up and come out!" cried a loud female voice. The small amount of light filtering in through a few high barred windows in the hallway nearly blinded me. Everything around me looked foggy and white. "You stink," the guard snarled. She handed me loose-fitting clothes and led me to a washroom where I could shower and change. "Go clean yourself," she said as she pushed me inside.

When I had finished washing, I stepped into the clean clothes, wrapping them over my wet body. The guard ushered me into the office of a burly fiftysomething man in a police uniform. His glasses made him look scholarly and less intimidating. "Sit," he commanded. He pushed some papers across his desk at me.

"You will go home now and await further instructions," the official said.

I was still blinking as my eyes adjusted to the light, my body weak from lack of food and sleep, my thoughts slow and fuzzy. Was I being placed under house arrest? I wanted to ask what offence I had committed, but once again I kept my mouth shut.

The guard escorted me out of the official's office and handed me over to a policeman with a round, soft, kind-looking face. As he drove me to my birth parents' apartment in Nanjing, we chatted a little. He told me that I had brought shame to our country because of my research on female infanticide, which had caused an international human rights uproar. Through him I learnt that, although my name had not appeared in the newspapers, I had been traced as the source of the embarrassment. I would have been in even more trouble, except no one had been able to find any evidence that I had done anything wrong.

"You are a lucky girl," he said before dropping me off at the gates of NUAA. "If this were the Cultural Revolution, you surely would be dead by now."

But I didn't feel lucky. I felt as though a 1,000lb stone had crushed my chest. I didn't know where I would be sent next or what kind of future I would face.

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