

Cheng Lei

Journalist, Sky News Australia

Antonia Rosen, Legal Counsel at News Corp Australia, sits down with journalist **Cheng Lei** to discuss her career path, her ordeals in detention in China, and the wisdom she has gathered along the way. Cheng Lei is a Chinese-born Australian television news anchor and business reporter. Prior to her arrest, she served as a prominent news anchor for the China Global Television Network, a state-owned English news channel. In 2020, she was arrested by Chinese officials on suspicion of carrying out activities endangering China's national security. Ultimately, the allegation boiled down to breaking a government-imposed embargo by a few minutes following a briefing. She was subsequently held in detention for 19 months, before facing a trial held behind closed doors. She remained incarcerated until October 2023. The International Federation of Journalists said her detention and incarceration were without cause or reason and deeply concerning. Since her return to Australia, Cheng Lei has taken on the role of presenter and columnist at Sky News Australia, she was announced as The Australian's Australian Person of the Year in 2023, and she has been making up for lost time with her family.

ANTONIA ROSEN: Lei – thank you so much for taking the time to speak with the CLB. Can you tell us about your career path? You didn't start off as a journalist. How did you come to journalism?

CHENG LEI: I went to Uni aged 16 (looking back: mistake, good academic results don't mean overall maturity) and I was too chicken to stick with my interest in journalism when my dad opposed it. (More on that later.) For five stultifying years, I went through the motions of being an accountant but was always keen to change, hungry to use my bilingual advantage. Thankfully, I saw a job advertised for a business analyst in China with Finemores (later taken over by Toll Holdings). A month later I was in Shandong, eastern China, learning about a different industry in a totally alien working environment. It was exhilarating and exasperating all at once. My bilingual and bicultural skills were prized. My preconceived notions were challenged. I was growing amidst the chaos and confusion.

When Toll decided to exit, I was determined to stay in China and said no to their offer of a job in Melbourne. A friend told me the English channel of China Central Television (CCTV-9) may be interested in someone like me. I jumped at the opportunity. I passed a translation test (I qualified as a N.A.A.T.I. translator in 1995), and a voice test (having done voice-overs for Chinese textbooks in University) with flying colours. As it turned out, the combination of native level English and Chinese with a business background was a valuable one and not common in those days.

First month, I was an intern. Second month, I was asked to try to report on something. (I remember the story was the Chinese securities regulator's latest policy on foreign investors.) A month later, I was given a pre-recorded 15 minute weekly show to present. The studio was a shoebox and there was no prompter – but I was elated.

ANTONIA: Do you have any advice for women who are exploring different career paths? It can feel daunting to make a change. How did you navigate that? What from your earlier work experience have you brought with you to journalism?

LEI: Be truthful to yourself about what you love – write down the things that make you happy and fulfilled, regardless of profession, job titles and salary. For me, it is creating something, learning more about the world, meeting people and getting to know their stories, telling people about what I know. But when I graduated from university, I didn't know that – I thought "success" was about the corporate ladder and high salaries.

If you want to change careers, go for it with gusto. We can be trapped in "good" jobs. Sometimes it's easier to move when you have nothing to lose. Life's too short to be a corporate zombie, to be always wishing you could win the lottery and retire. When you find something you love to do, you won't want to retire. You won't mind the overtime.

Don't worry about the "waste" of your marks or "waste" of your degree. The real waste, the more tragic waste, is that of your life, when you wake up groaning, when you spend the day daydreaming about holidays, the weekend, lunchtime.

I had felt that after five years of "pretend work", I had satisfied my dad's wishes enough so it was time to live on my terms. Taking a 90% pay cut to go from expat business analyst to TV station intern employed on local wages was risky, but the best thing I ever did.

If you love what you do, the money will come.

Because I had worked in a few different companies in a financial capacity, it was easy to understand the corporate environment and the pressures of different industries, plus the analytical bent, both helped in being a business reporter.



ANTONIA: You have covered some major events and interviewed some big names throughout your career (Bill Gates and Richard Branson to name a few). What has been the most memorable interview of your career?

LEI: It is no one in particular and every one of them. I'm honoured to have been able to talk to so many accomplished people – Mick Jagger, Rod Laver, Shaquille O'Neal, Nobel and Oscar winners, human rights activists, entrepreneurs who have changed the lives of millions, and scores of others who are not "big names" but are heroes nevertheless. It keeps me extremely humble. There is always someone more talented who has more heart and works harder than you.

It's not the title that matters. Of all the people I've interviewed, one has been executed for corruption, one died in a diving accident, Schumacher is still in a coma, many have retired and lost the halo of "importance". Does that make them less interesting as people? Even the most ordinary vox pops can be uniquely insightful. The most powerful leader can be full of clichés. Those with integrity will always impress, regardless of post-nominals.

Even among the rich and powerful, I got to see that what really makes them happy are: (1) connections to family, e.g. a billionaire with multiple undriven Bugattis but treasures the plastic Swatch given to him by his grandson; and (2) what they can do to change the world.

I am very fortunate in that every one of those interviews has given me a glimpse into a different part of the world. This has helped me understand people and issues that are difficult to fathom.

ANTONIA: What is the best professional advice you have received and what advice would you give to a young woman embarking on a career in journalism, or even more generally?

LEI: I'd say the best "anti-advice" I ever got was from dad, who said "don't study journalism, you're not blonde, you're not pretty, and Lee Lin-Chin will never retire, do something employable". Perhaps having something to prove is a good motivator.

The only career advice I'd give to my kids would be "spend time early on to find what you DON'T want to do". Generally, I follow mum's advice "you don't lose out by doing more". My motto is "overcommit", because it kills any sluggishness.

If you want an opportunity badly enough, throw yourself at it, offer to do it for free, pay out of your own pocket, and always think about "what's in it for them".

ANTONIA: Did your experience being detained in China change your perspective on journalism, your career and the role that they play in your life?

LEI: For a while I hated that my job landed me in jail and left my kids without their mum for so long. It was put to me that if I snooped less and blabbed less, then I would not have "gotten into trouble". I've come to see that as indoctrination.

The ordeal has energised me – I've reaffirmed my belief in the purpose of journalism. There is also an "if I could go through that I can do anything" daring when it comes to trying new things and taking on new challenges.

ANTONIA: You recently took a trip to Port Moresby to trek the Kokoda trail and ended up reporting on the deadly riots in Port Moresby. What drives you to keep pursuing these stories?

LEI: It's a human instinct to tell people about what happens around you – I just happen to be in a profession that hones the instinct.

I like to add nuance and context to sensationalised stories and misunderstood issues, because if left uncorrected, myths turn into "facts" and can perpetuate problems, even turn into conflict.

If anyone tries to tell you a simple story or a screaming headline about an issue, or slap a label on a country or a person, you should automatically raise a sceptical brow and ask many questions.

ANTONIA: You had a stellar career, and your life was suddenly turned upside down in a completely unforeseen way (to put it lightly). Do you have any advice for women who are experiencing adversity, and how to get through it?

LEI: Experience helped shape a strong and positive mindset – I was taken hostage and raped in my own home at 19, bashed

and emotionally abused by my now ex-husband in my thirties, had a miscarriage and an abortion in the same period. Getting through each crisis made me better prepared for the next one, the psyche more resilient while the humour got darker. I would think to myself in detention, "if I could get up the day after being belted in the head so hard the bronze buckle flew off and make alphabet shaped fruit salad for my kids' breakfast, and that was by a man who was supposed to love me and care for me, these strangers can hardly hurt me in the same way. I'll get through this."

Over the last three years, I have probably coached myself with every "chicken soup for the soul" saying there is, from Nietzsche's "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger", to "pressure makes diamonds", extracted takeaways from every prison memoir and survival story I ever read, like "Lack of humour is fatal" from *438 Days*, "to be strong is not being fearless, it is overcoming the fear" from the Mandela memoir, and channelled fictional characters like Jean Valjean and the Count of Monte Cristo. Knowing so many others have gone through much worse and come out the other side can make you strong.

Helping others will lift yourself. When I taught my cellmates English and songs, when I shared with them all the stories that inspired me and made their birthdays special, I felt my burden lighten and heart swell.

Exercise – when you get through physical challenges and discipline your body, the confidence and morale boost will improve your mood, creating a virtuous cycle.

Embrace the pain – the Buddhist mantra of "life is full of suffering, everything is in flux, only when you stop grasping, can you have peace of mind" helped me think of pain as inevitable and not to be avoided.

ANTONIA: You have started the Australian Wrongful and Arbitrary Detention Alliance with Kylie Moore-Gilbert and Sean Turnell, as well as your partner Nick Coyle. Can you tell us a little about your mission and how people can help?

LEI: We want people to know more about the issue, to better help the families of detainees – how to navigate the bureaucracy, how to decide what is best for loved ones, where to get support. In the US and Canada, there have been legislative changes in the wake of high-profile detention cases. If lawyers in Australia can help with detention cases pro-bono, if they could contribute knowledge and advice on arbitrary detention cases worldwide, if they can add their voice to legislative progress, it would be a great help.

ANTONIA: I can imagine that it might feel that people have come to define you in some way by your experience in detention. You are also an excellent journalist, a mother, a wife. How do you handle what people project onto you? How do you see yourself and how would you like people to see you going forward?

LEI: Having been through a very lonely and difficult ordeal, having had my name dragged through the mud in China and having lost almost everything overnight, I am absolutely secure in what I stand for, what I live for, what I love, and what I can do. People are way too complicated and fascinating to be defined, detainee or not.

We should take people as we find them.

ANTONIA: Is there anything else you would like to tell CAMLA readers?

LEI: Thank you for being part of a very noble profession. Please say "g'day" if you see me goggle-eyed in the dairy section at the supermarket, and please put up with my driving badly if you happen to be in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

ANTONIA: Thank you so much Lei for your words of wisdom and your courage. It's an absolute privilege to interview you and it's an inspiration to us all. Happy International Women's Day!