

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 15 ISSUE-6 DECEMBER 2024

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Unveiling Feminine Resilience: An Analytical Praxis of Empowerment and Resistance in Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* and Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai*

Theadora War

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

St. Edmund’s College Shillong.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14606093>

Article History: Submitted-27/11/2024, Revised-18/12/2024, Accepted-21/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

The title “Unveiling Feminine Resilience: An Analytical Praxis of Empowerment and Resistance in Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* and Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai*” signals both the critical analysis of themes such as empowerment and resistance and the practical application of these ideas to broader discussions about women’s role, especially in historical and political contexts such as the Cultural Revolution. This study is an in-depth examination of how theory and practice intertwine within the narratives of Chang and Cheng. The concept of feminine resilience—women’s ability to resist, survive and even thrive in the face of social, political and cultural oppression—has long been a central theme in literature. In the context of 20th-century China, where drastic upheavals marked the socio-political landscape, women’s narratives take on added significance. By examining the two texts through feminist, historical and sociopolitical frameworks, we uncover how both memoirs document personal struggles and serve as acts of political resistance, thus, embodying an ongoing dialogue between lived experience and theory. The term analytical praxis refers to the interplay between theory and practice, where theoretical concepts are not merely abstract but are enacted and applied in real-world situations. In this case, feminist theory, particularly concepts of empowerment and resistance, informs our reading of the two memoirs. At the same time, the women’s lived experiences depicted in *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai* feed back into these theoretical frameworks, challenging and reshaping them.

Keywords: resilience, resistance, memoirs, feminism, empowerment.

The socio-political landscape of 20th-century China was marked by seismic shifts, especially under Communist Party rule, which sought to transform Chinese society through radical reformations. Following the end of imperial rule in 1911 and a protracted period of instability marked by civil wars, the ascension of the Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, gained control in 1949 and established the People's Republic of China. The Party aimed to build a socialist society through sweeping economic and social reforms, yet the authoritarian nature of these policies often brought significant suffering to the populace. Under the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals, artists and perceived class enemies were imprisoned or even executed. Schools and universities were closed; books, artworks and cultural artifacts were destroyed. Families and communities were urged to denounce loved ones to demonstrate unyielding loyalty to Mao and the Party. This era was characterized by severe ideological control and loss of personal freedom, with millions of Chinese enduring physical and psychological suffering. While it was framed as a movement to purge the country of bourgeois elements and promote communist ideology, it was, in practice, marked by pervasive violence, persecution and an erosion of personal liberties. Women, in particular, were subject to compounded oppression as they faced both the weight of patriarchal traditions and the repressive political system. *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai* are set against this backdrop providing personal testimonies of life under Mao's regime. These narratives interrogate the mechanisms of political repression faced by individuals, particularly women, and their acts of resilience and resistance.

Wild Swans is a memoir that traces the lives of three generations of women: Jung Chang's grandmother, mother and herself. Through the stories of these women, Chang provides an intimate portrayal of how political and social changes in China impacted the lives of ordinary people, particularly women. At the heart of the memoir is the theme of feminine resilience—each woman faces her unique struggles, but each also finds ways to assert her resistance against the forces that seek to control her. Jung Chang's grandmother, Yu-Fang, lived in an era where women's voices were severely limited. As a concubine given to a warlord, her fate was seemingly sealed by patriarchal norms that treated women as commodities. However, Yu-Fang's decision to leave the warlord's household and later marry for love may be viewed as an act of resistance. Despite the constraints of her time, she manages to reclaim some control over her life, challenging the expectations placed on her by her society. Yu-Fang's life reflects the intergenerational transmission of resilience, as her actions pave the way for the greater agency exercised by her daughter and granddaughter.

Jung Chang's mother, De-Hong, represents a shift from traditional to modern forms of feminine empowerment. As a committed Communist revolutionary, De-Hong initially embraced the promise of equality and social progress offered by the Communist Party. Her participation in the revolution may be seen as an attempt to gain political and personal autonomy in a rapidly changing world. However, as the true nature of the regime reveals itself during the Cultural Revolution, De-Hong becomes disillusioned with the very system she once fought to uphold. Her resistance becomes more pronounced as she defies political authorities and risks personal safety to protect her family. De-Hong's journey reflects the complexity of empowerment in the context of political ideology. Initially empowered by her role in the Communist revolution, she later rejects and resists the regime's oppressive practices.

Jung Chang's own story embodies a more personal form of empowerment. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, she is initially indoctrinated into Maoist ideology. However, as she matures, she begins to question the system and ultimately rejects it. Her decision to leave China and pursue education abroad marks a pivotal moment of personal empowerment. Chang's act of writing *Wild Swans* in the form of a memoir itself is a form of resistance. By documenting her family's experiences, she challenges the official narratives of the Chinese Communist Party and gives voice to those who were silenced. In this way, Chang's memoir serves as both a personal and political act of empowerment, as she reclaims her family's story from the oppressive forces that sought to erase it.

While Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* is an intergenerational account, Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* focuses more specifically on her traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. As the widow of a former Kuomintang official and an employee of a foreign company, Cheng became a target of the Communist Party. She was imprisoned and subjected to years of interrogation and torture, yet she refused to confess to crimes she did not commit. Cheng's refusal to submit to her captors' demands is a key theme of her memoir. Despite the physical and psychological torture she endures, she remains steadfast in her refusal to confess to false charges. Her resistance is not overtly political in the sense of organizing protests or engaging in direct activism; rather, it is a deeply personal form of resistance rooted in her moral integrity. Being fluent in English and well-educated, Cheng uses her knowledge to outmanoeuvre her interrogators, further depicting how intellectual resilience significantly plays in her empowerment. Even while imprisoned, her ability to maintain her intellectual autonomy

is a profound act of resistance. By refusing to betray herself or her beliefs, Cheng asserts her agency in a situation designed to strip her of it.

Wild Swans and *Life and Death in Shanghai* explore the theme of feminine resilience, but they do so in different ways. In *Wild Swans*, feminine resilience is depicted as an intergenerational process, with each generation of women finding new ways to assert their agency in an increasingly repressive society. In *Life and Death in Shanghai*, resilience is portrayed more as an individual struggle, with Cheng's integrity as the foundation of her resistance. An important aspect of feminine resilience worth highlighting is the internal resilience demonstrated by these women. As individuals subject to double oppression and often deprived of opportunities to articulate their struggles openly, they transcend physical resilience by cultivating an inner strength rooted in their beliefs and self-worth. This form of resilience becomes a critical mechanism for resisting external pressures to conform. In *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Nien Cheng exemplifies this internal resilience through her stern refusal to confess to false charges or compromise her personal convictions, despite enduring severe physical torture. Her commitment to maintaining her intellectual integrity becomes an act of self-preservation, which further illustrates the vital role of inner fortitude in survival. Critics such as Henry Giroux might interpret Cheng's resistance as a form of "border pedagogy" (Giroux 51) where her refusal to internalize the dominant ideology reflects her determination and ability to preserve her identity and intellectual freedom. Sara Ahmed's concept of the "feminist killjoy" explores how women who refuse to conform to societal expectations disrupt social harmony and, in doing so, challenge oppressive structures. Ahmed's work emphasizes how emotions, particularly "negative" emotions like anger and sadness, may formulate themselves as political resistance and sources of feminist agency. In *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Cheng's refusal to confess, despite prolonged torture, positions her as a figure of resistance who disrupts the Party's narrative of obedience.

In *Wild Swans*, Chang's mother embodies this internal resilience by balancing the competing demands of loyalty to her family and commitment to the Communist Party. After the fall of The Great Leap Forward, her parents, like many other officials working for the Communist Party, were no longer "passionately devoted to their work as they had been in the 1950s" (*Wild Swans* 307). Being branded as anti-Mao policymakers and "capitalist roaders" (*Wild Swans* 409), her parents are officially denounced. They were treated as traitors of Mao and "deserters" ("Counter-monuments: the Anti-monumental and the Dialogic" 956) of

Communism. They had ink poured over their heads and were forced to wear denouncing placards around their necks. This torture had a lasting impact on her father, physically and mentally. One day after one of the meetings of her “denounce[ment]” (*Wild Swans* 410), her mother “came home with her face twisted in pain. She had been ordered to kneel on broken glass” (*Wild Swans* 410). Her mother wanted to protect her children from knowing the full truth about what had been happening to her. As she did not want them to worry about her, she made it sound as “undramatic as possible” (*Wild Swans* 411). De-hong’s story reflects broader tensions between private and public spaces in Maoist China. It illustrates how resilience can manifest not through outright rebellion but through the determination to uphold one’s humanity and familial bonds despite overwhelming political pressure. Despite her intense political scrutiny and hardships, she clandestinely preserves her dignity and upholds her family’s values. Her ability to maintain a coherent sense of self in the face of authoritarian control demonstrates how women negotiate internal landscapes of resilience to safeguard their identities amidst oppressive socio-political environments.

Women often draw strength from their roles within family and community, leveraging these networks as sources of empowerment and survival. In *Wild Swans*, familial solidarity across generations formulates itself into a form of resilience, with each woman learning from her forebear’s struggles, sacrifices and quiet defiance. This solidarity provides Chang’s family with both emotional support and practical strategies for enduring the hardships imposed by the Maoist regime and patriarchy. This generational solidarity is crucial to Chang’s survival and development. Chang’s mother, for instance, maintains her loyalty to the Party only until it conflicts with her responsibilities as a mother, illustrating how family bonds allow her to resist oppressive expectations without overt rebellion. The sense of solidarity and mutual care within Chang’s family enables each woman to find her way of withstanding the forces that seek to erase personal autonomy. The family provides a private space where personal beliefs, cultural traditions and shared memories may be preserved, subtly resisting the state’s attempts to dictate identity and loyalty. While Nien Cheng is isolated for much of her imprisonment, her connection to her daughter, Meiping, remains a profound source of strength and motivation for survival. Cheng’s love for Meiping reinforces her determination to endure the harsh interrogations and unjust treatment, as she clings to the hope of being reunited with her. Nien Cheng’s survival aligns with Nedelsky’s assertion that relationships provide the framework within which autonomy is both experienced and exercised. Cheng’s attachment to her daughter exemplifies this: her maternal bond and memories of their relationship sustain her sense of

purpose and identity amidst the isolation and dehumanization of imprisonment. The concept of relational autonomy is rooted in the work of feminist ethicists such as Jennifer Nedelsky and Catriona Mackenzie, who challenge traditional notions of autonomy as individualistic and self-contained. They argue that autonomy is deeply embedded in relationships and social contexts, emphasizing how interpersonal connections shape individuals' identities and capacity for resilience.

Even after Meiping's tragic death, the memory of their bond and Cheng's role as a mother fuel her resilience. Further, the memories of her family are acts of defiance in and of themselves. In her prison cell, she uses these memories to construct a mental sanctuary that shields her from the Party's ideological impositions. These recollections become her internal fortress against the Communist Party's psychological tactics. Her enduring connection to her family and former life helps her resist the Party's attempts to brainwash and intimidate her into submission. Her refusal to renounce her values, despite the Party's pressure, is a testament to the power of familial and community loyalty as resistance. This solidarity, even in memory, allows her to assert her truth against the state's narratives.

Through family and community solidarity, Chang and Cheng demonstrate that resilience is not solely an individual attribute but a collective force shaped by emotional bonds and shared experiences. This solidarity offers emotional grounding and empowerment, allowing these women to endure physical isolation and social suppression. In oppressive contexts where overt resistance is dangerous, family and community solidarity becomes a vital source of resilience, enabling individuals to retain their identity, values and sense of self. As a framework for resilience, family and community solidarity reveal how personal empowerment often emerges through collective strength, creating spaces of quiet defiance within even the most restrictive environments. Feminine resilience through family and community solidarity reflects women's ability to endure and empower others despite intersecting layers of oppression—whether patriarchal, political or cultural. Feminist theorist bell hooks highlights that the collective experiences of women in oppressive systems can foster shared understanding and solidarity, which are essential to both survival and resistance. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks examines how those in marginalized positions, especially women, use their status to cultivate resistance and autonomy. For hooks, the “margin” is not just a place of exclusion but also a space where unique forms of resistance and empowerment

can flourish. Her ideas are especially relevant to women under authoritarian regimes, where marginality often provides a site for subtle resistance and solidarity

Furthermore, feminine resilience often manifests in subtle, everyday acts that assert personal agency in environments of strict control. These acts may not directly challenge the political system but enable women to achieve personal autonomy. For instance, Chang's mother and grandmother in *Wild Swans* practice small forms of resistance by finding ways to protect their families and adapting Party rules to their advantage, subtly pushing back against authoritarian expectations. On the other hand, Cheng's memoir highlights her resilience in refusing to conform mentally or emotionally, transforming her imprisonment into a form of protest. Her defiance—such as her refusal to sign false confessions—becomes a testament to her empowerment.

To further reiterate this emphasis, writing and sharing their stories is itself an act of resilience and empowerment, especially for survivors such as Chang and Cheng. Through the mode of a memoir, they transform personal experiences of hardship into a form of collective memory that highlights the resilience of women within the broader context of Chinese history. Memoir serves as a potent strategy of counter-memory in Chang's *Wild Swans*, offering a deeply personal and subjective account of Chinese history and society. Gore Vidal says: "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts, double-checked" (qtd. in *Memoir: A History* 3). A memoir may also focus on both the author, as well as other individuals with whom the author has a close relationship. By reflecting on her memories and those of her family, Chang offers an account of Chinese history that resists oversimplification and celebrates the complexity of lived experience. Since the memoir provides the freedom to talk about oneself and one's life as one perceives it to be, Chang not only pays tribute to the lives lost in the Cultural Revolution but also challenges the official narratives propagated by the Chinese Communist Party.

Like Jung Chang, Nien Cheng's decision to write her memoir can be seen as an act of empowerment. In sharing her story with the world, Cheng empowers herself and others who have faced similar oppression. Cheng's memoir also highlights the role of memory in resistance. By remembering and recounting the events of the Cultural Revolution, Cheng resists the erasure of history perpetrated by the Chinese government. Her memoir becomes a form of political resistance, as she refuses to allow the injustices she suffered to be forgotten. Sidonie

Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography*, argue that memoir enables women to challenge historical erasure by placing their narratives within broader socio-political contexts.

Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* recounts her persecution during China's Cultural Revolution. By documenting her personal experiences of resistance and resilience, Cheng exposes the gendered dimensions of state oppression and preserves the truth of a traumatic era. Women's roles and expectations are uniquely challenged under authoritarian regimes, where they are often subjected to both political and gender-based repression. For example, in Maoist China, women were promoted as equal workers but were simultaneously expected to embody self-sacrifice and conformity. In both *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai*, the protagonists' resilience is gendered by resisting both political and societal expectations. In doing so, they create a nuanced form of resistance that affirms their identities beyond state-defined roles.

Resilience also includes the act of preserving cultural and personal identity amid forces that attempt to erase individuality. Both Chang and Cheng show how holding on to memories and personal beliefs is an empowering act. Their memoirs become a form of identity preservation, asserting their individual stories against an official narrative that sought to control personal histories. By remembering and retelling, they ensure that their lives and experiences contribute to a larger, more inclusive historical record. The framework of feminine resilience and empowerment reveals that resilience in oppressive conditions is complex, involving psychological strength, community support, small acts of defiance, narrative reclamation, and the preservation of self. By examining these aspects, we see that feminine resilience is not a passive endurance but an active, multi-dimensional response to adversity. Through Chang and Cheng's memoirs, we gain insight into how women's empowerment and resilience are forged in quiet acts of defiance, loyalty to self and family, and the courage to share one's truth, ultimately contributing to a broader, more inclusive understanding of historical resilience. Resilience through family and community solidarity is a vital theme in *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai*, illustrating how close-knit bonds provide strength and resistance amid oppressive regimes. In these memoirs, family and community support systems not only help individuals withstand political persecution but also reinforce personal identity and values, enabling women to persist in the face of relentless adversity. This solidarity is a survival mechanism and a quiet form of resistance, which ultimately unveils empowerment that maybe attained through shared resilience. Through an analytical praxis that integrates feminist theory

with the lived experiences of women during the Cultural Revolution, *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai* provide a space into the exploration of the nature of feminine resilience, empowerment, and resistance. Together, these memoirs shed light on the human consequences of political repression, highlighting how resilience and resistance emerge as acts of quiet defiance against authoritarianism. Through their personal narratives, both Chang and Cheng offer a window into the broader struggles faced by many under Maoist rule, making visible the inner lives often obscured by historical narratives of state power.

Works Cited:

Ahmed, Sara. *The Feminist Killjoy*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. Anchor Books, 2003.

Cheng, Nien. *Life and Death in Shanghai*. Knopf, 1987.

Giroux, Henry A. "Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism." *The Journal of*

Education, vol. 170, no. 3, 1988, pp. 162-181. JSTOR,

www.jstor.org/stable/42748653.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.

Mackenzie, Catriona. *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Nedelsky, Jennifer. *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism: The Madisonian Framework and Its Legacy*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Stevens, Quentin, et al. "Counter-monuments: The Anti-monumental and the Dialogic." *The Journal of Architecture*, vol.17, no. 6, 2012, pp. 951- 972.