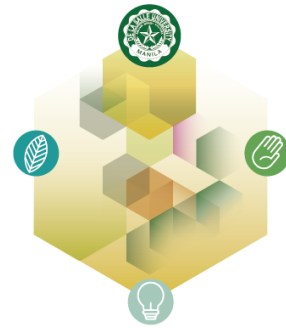


Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



Stories of Conflict, Survival, and Escape Across Selected Texts on the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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Abstract: The Cultural Revolution was supposed to be China's move to a more revolutionary society by purifying itself from counterrevolutionary and bourgeoisie elements. However, mainstream critiques unravel this period as a chaotic one, characterized by faltering social institutions, economic stagnation, and normalized violence. Unpacking events like the CR highlights the importance of processing collective and national traumas that serve as the foundations for understanding China in the contemporary context. Given this, through a thorough reading of the CR memoirs *Life and Death in Shanghai*, *Red Azalea*, and *Red Scarf Girl*, this paper explores conflict, survival, and escape using the lenses of people's history, social history, and phenomenology. This paper considers the contribution of personal and "informal" histories in encouraging appreciation of CR discourse alongside official histories. More importantly, endeavors on history by the people underscore the proactive role Filipino scholars must also engage in to reflect and understand the processing of their own history.

Key Words: Cultural Revolution; memory; narration; textual analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first half of 1966, Mao Zedong began the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, popularly referred to as the Cultural Revolution (CR, hereafter). Moving the country away from ideological revisionism was supposedly the CR's main intention. It was a process of purifying China from the *sì jiù* (四旧, four olds), that seemed to impede the country from attaining the next level of development and prosperity.

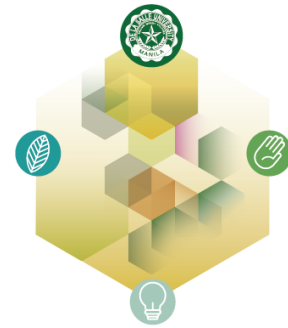
The *Resolution on CPC History* summarizes an official history of the CR as told by the Chinese Communist Party (Party, hereafter). According to this document, the CR comprises three stages: solidifying its foundations, dealing with factional rifts, and adhering to the Party and the people's will. The Party, however, argues that there were no grounds for its definitions. Such ambiguity led to confusion, relying on the masses caused a divorce from key segments, and it did not constitute a revolution or social progress (CPC, 1981).

The document seems to balance the direct scrutiny of Mao and his leadership, and the upholding of revolutionary and socialist zeal in China's contemporary leadership structures. This can be construed as a critical view of the Mao era's final decade. However, this

remains limited only to a textual appraisal of the late paramount leader. It also asserts that despite the CR being a monumental error, it was, after all, an error of a great proletarian revolutionary (CPC, 1981).

On the other hand, a volume of media texts in many forms allows further inquiry about the CR. While these other texts may refer to the experiences of the Chinese people, they also become relevant for those outside China to understand this period. With the existence of an official and some non-official stories, the atmosphere across these several narrations prevents the coming to terms with this contentious period.

In China's context, understanding historical episodes, including trauma and prosperity, requires the reader to look closely into varied accounts. Studying memoirs aids in this understanding. They demonstrate an overall process where the memoirist, the written text, and the readers are all part of. As Philippine National Artist Cirilo F. Bautista (1988) asserts, the creative energies of writers translate into valid historical narrations, highlighting the human touch that the writer provides in revitalizing historical facts (Pasco, 2004). The memoirist also becomes material to the memory construction process. They narrate not only their life stories but also the story of the collective. Readers, in



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turn, develop their own perceptions and judgments of the histories indicated in the written text. Hence, historical transference becomes a communicative process between the writer and the readers.

Using the memoirs *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Zheng Nian¹ (1988), *Red Azalea* by Min Anqi² (1994), and *Red Scarf Girl* by Jiang Jili (1997), the narration and depiction of conflict, survival, and escape found in the said memoirs are unpacked in this essay.

2. METHODS AND FRAMES

2.1 Selection of the Works Analyzed

The selected memoirs are a considerable selection of both standard references in the study of the Mao era and the CR (Gao, 2008). Conflict, survival, and escape all appear in the selected memoirs despite the variations among the respective authors in gender, family background, political motivations, and other points of intersectionality. The way these thematic anchors manifest in the memoirs ranges from personal struggles and coping mechanisms to social interactions and even political events in the memoirists' lives.

Throughout Zheng Nian's memoir *Life and Death in Shanghai*, she recounts her persecution due to her background and old affiliations. As her writing progresses, she describes her constant battle for justice and her deteriorating physical condition due to the harsh treatment while imprisoned. She then focuses on the events following her release from prison, focusing on her efforts to uncover the truth about her daughter Meiping's death and her decision to leave China for good. The epilogue concludes the memoir with her reflections on the CR and its aftermath.

Min Anqi's *Red Azalea* details her coming of age in CR China. In the first part, she discusses how her peasant family's belief in Mao and the Party influenced her thinking. The second part details her life as a Red Guard, as well as her encounters with difficult conditions and camp factionalism. The third part focuses on disappointment as she fails to secure a role in Madame Mao Jiang Qing's³ film project, also named *Red Azalea*, and her eventual apex as a revolutionary actress. The memoir concludes with the closure of the

project, prompting Min to hide and eventually escape from China.

Jiang Jili details her and her family's CR story in her memoir *Red Scarf Girl*. Despite her efforts to become an ideal young revolutionary, being from the bourgeoisie made it difficult for the Jiang children to manage relationships with peers and gain opportunities for her future. She then ponders on her fate and stands by her family during a search for an incriminating letter in their home in the latter part of her memoir. The epilogue spells out her own views of the CR.

2.2 Analytic and Theoretical Frames

This study adopts core assumptions found in people's history, social history, and phenomenology, utilizing quotidian and regular entities in developing a material version of such memories.

Memoirs are memories as introspection (Stearns, 2003), where the collective can re-narrate relatively under-explored themes and events in a historical period. In many societies, people's history also allows memoirs to deviate from mainstream re-narrations, which typically include stories written by those in power, focusing on lived experiences of ordinary people and the feelings of the oppressed, excluded, pauperized, and marginalized (Port, 2015). Memoirs dare to divulge unconventional and even uncomfortable stories, those that official narratives would reconsider holding back, inevitably becoming both a complementary and a contradictory force placed against these official versions in developing inclusive narrations of historical events. This property of memoirs provides the multiplicity implored by memory construction. Therefore, memoirs emphasize the significance of the dry and mundane dimensions of individual living, centering on the underlying structural forces, mentalities, and the masses (Port, 2015) as critical components of an inclusive narrative.

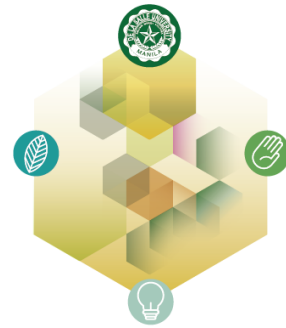
The memoirs' narrators serve as active subjects than simply passive objects of history (Port, 2015). This allows the narrative to be reinvigorated by those who witnessed and experienced the story as they tell new perspectives amid the *in media res* nature of history in their time. The same history moves the writer in the story that one retells, a part of the same narrative that one relives at a specific moment. Consequently, this empowers those who tell the story (Lixl-Purcell, 1994). The memory construction process commences with a memoirist who includes their life as part of a historical event's larger social, political, and cultural backdrops.

¹ More popularly spelled as *Nien Cheng*.

² More popularly spelled as *Anchee Min*.

³ Not to be confused with the third memoirist Jiang Jili. All mentions of Jiang Qing will bear her full name, while Jiang Jili will simply be referred to as *Jiang*.

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Memoirs highlight understanding social and psychological events from the perspective of the people involved (Welman & Kruger, 1999, as cited in Groenewald, 2004). For the memoir to become relatable, it allows the memory construction beyond the confines of the writer. An event's occurrence becomes tantamount to developing a coherent collective experience that binds together people of a group.

These analytical approaches reveal the deep memories of the different people who lived through and beyond the CR. These also highlight Gao's (2008) discussion of the various natures and attributes of CR memoirs, that they can uncover the roles, perspectives, and actions of other individuals during this period.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Conflict Stories

These images of conflict found in the memoirs are consistent with the CR narratives of victimization, catastrophe, and trauma, echoing Gao's (2008) observation of violence, brutality, and their causes during this period.

"Confess! Confess!" and "We will not allow a class enemy to argue!" At the same time, the hysterical Red Guards and Revolutionaries crowded around me threateningly, shook their fists in my face, pulled at my clothes, and spat on my jacket while yelling, "Dirty spy," "Dirty running dog," "We will kill you," and so on. Several times I had to brace myself to stand firmly when they pushed me very hard (Zheng, 1988, 120).

"Every time I hear drums and gongs, I'm afraid that they're coming to our house. My heart starts racing, and the closer they come, the worse it gets (Jiang, 1997, 120).

Meanwhile, the CPC (1981) declares that the CR was a struggle against revisionist and capitalist paths. It was a time of confusion between right and wrong on theory and policy agenda. The confusion is also consistent with the narratives of defiance and antagonization found across the memoirs.

One quote mentions an old maxim of the Chinese justice system, giving "leniency to those who confess, and severity to those who resist" (Jiang, 1997, 175). This was not only a commonly uttered statement by CR authorities, but it was also the subtext of enforced directives and policies. These figures of authority took on a more active role in advancing its philosophies and objectives by personifying what the CR stood for. Zheng (1988) elaborates the quotation by

sharing an experience with the special handcuffs. Such a device was used as a metaphor for the prison authorities' tighter grip on her until a confession was obtained. This same quote was mentioned by Jiang where the term "severity" referred to physical and mental brutality, while the term "leniency" referred to the promise of mitigation after delivering a confession (Jiang, 1997, 175).

The CR appeared to have been run by authorities who redefined lines based on personal notions of being a revolutionary. Furthermore, this appears problematic, as it echoes people's feelings that the Party was not as actively critical of these ills, which had caused trauma and catastrophe in many lives. Defiance narratives also highlight some social and cultural rifts, particularly when younger memoirists recall condemnations of educational authorities. This condition exacerbated Chinese society's ethical and intellectual contentions, as they ran counter to the deeply ingrained ethos of world harmony and courtesy to authority figures.

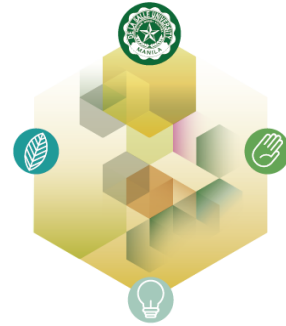
The CPC's (1981) official histories also mention politics and factionalism during the CR as directly impacting China in various ways, which is observed in Chinese politics in general (Huang, 2000). The revolutionary masses were powerful forces during this time, even Party members and officials were attacked. The memoirs also note selective recurrences of politics and factionalism as key conflict themes. Zheng recollects the political side of the CR in her personal account.

While the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was different things to different people, this gigantic struggle lasting ten full years was essentially a contest between two conflicting Party policies personified by Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi (Zheng, 1988, 209).

Min's stories in the Red Fire Farm and the Shanghai Film Studio echo these, where her life unfolded against the backdrops of politics and factionalism, as well as in her immediate communities and circles. More specifically, the project Red Azalea was put on hold after public opinion turned against Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four.

It was said that Comrade Jiang Ching's comments on the cast were a denunciation of her future. It was said that Comrade Jiang Ching inspected the rough cuts and commented, "All is not gold that glitters"—meaning she had seen no real talent in the cuts. The phrase was printed on a red-headlined document. It was read in meetings at the studio (Min, 1994, 267-268).

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According to the CPC (1981), such a juncture in Chinese history did not include any revolution or progress. This view differs from another where the CR was a form of state-led antagonism, as the Party admits in its official records to being a victim of the CR as well. Furthermore, it states that this period significantly departed from the country's past regarding content and method (CPC, 1981). With these points, the Party appears capable of introspection and self-criticism. However, Zheng's observations on the Party contradict this. She points to the Party's inability and unwillingness to criticize Mao's policy explicitly (Zheng, 1988).

3.2 Survival and Escape Stories and the Party's Self-Correcting Properties

Survival stories provide a microscopic view of how people during the CR avoided conflict, mitigated difficult conditions, or dealt with the monotony and boredom of daily life. Prominently, survival stories also included how individuals tried to be the best possible revolutionary they could be, either to gain acceptance or avoid punishment.

"The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is an opportunity for all of us to study the Thought of Mao Zedong more thoroughly and diligently than ever before so that our political awareness is sharpened. Only then can we truly differentiate between those who are in the ranks of the People and those who are on the side of the Enemy (Zheng, 1988, 11).

I was at the school day and night promoting Communism, making revolution by painting slogans on walls and boards. I led my schoolmates in collecting pennies. We wanted to donate the pennies to the starving children in America. We were proud of what we did. We were sure that we were making red dots on the world's map. We were fighting for the final peace of the planet. Not for a day did I not feel heroic. I was the opera (Min, 1994, 26).

Official CR records highlight themes of survival as well. The CPC (1981) emphasizes its own self-correcting character as a political entity, as it sought to address the CR's errors. It is at its most reconstructive yet critical in its appraisal of the period when it acknowledges the direct and vicious attacks within its system from its enemies, conveying its own experience of hardship during the CR. Perhaps the Party's analysis and criticism of the CR show how it laments the various excesses and empathizes with the CR's victims. These also demonstrate how, regardless of criticisms, the Party can be an agent of change as

lessons from the CR cannot be separated from post-Mao socio-economic development.

But some may not be sympathetic to such a hopeful view of the Party. The Party is perceived as the governing entity within a contemporary party-state, that actively engages in the tight regulation of any discussions on the CR (Berry et al., 2016). The overall atmosphere of CR discourse conveyed by the CPC is seen to limit the people's struggles to uphold different dimensions of CR stories, echoing Nora's (1989) assertion about history continuously suspicious of memory.

Memories of escape are also worth mentioning, as they are not typically depicted across the memoirs as a deliberate exit from China. They are portrayed as a result of successive disappointments that the memoirists had encountered despite their best efforts and intentions to live a good life in their own view and that of the Party. Moreover, these memories of escape also espouse points of no return for all three memoirists, as they either failed to see the point of returning to China or their lives before the CR, or perhaps they were already unable to do so. Since the end of the CR no longer reflected the trauma and hardships encountered by the memoirists before the CR came to a close, their motivations also centered more on reestablishing their new lives and later, reflecting on their experience in the CR and what it all meant for them. Their narratives on escape communicate understandings of China from their perspectives as survivors of the period to the readers.

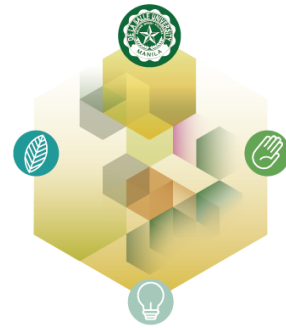
3.3 Commodification of CR Memoirs

While the memoirs represent complex histories, they also serve as platforms that communicate experiences and narratives that satisfy a certain readership's expectations. Moreover, it is also crucial to develop understandings of CR conflict happening within the larger backdrop of the Cold War.

On a personal level, all memoirists provide insights into and judgments on the conditions of socialist China, which relied on mass mobilization, collectivization, and propaganda. Here, the writing process asserts the authenticity through the memoirists' outlining of their own stories of struggle (Zarrow, 1999) while appealing to a general Western audience by making the story both relatable and palatable to a liberalist-leaning readership.

Consequently, the commodification of these memoirs is also the commodification of the Western liberal order's supremacy. The writings of such memoirs

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happened at the tail end and the aftermath of the Cold War. These publications exhibit how U.S. publication houses supported telling the story of the CR, which cannot be divorced from American ideological motivations. Being mindful of the potential and actual meanings in the texts is just as important as being conscious of how the perils of oversimplifying the CR dislodge the reader and the scholar from gaining a more complete understanding of the period. Ultimately, the memoirs must be read in their personal and social contexts.

3.4 CR Memory in Perspective

Since these CR narratives serve as artifacts of expression, the Party's version serves as expressions of pride that it can withstand enemies from within and attain rapid growth in decades. On the other hand, non-official histories can also be treated as catharsis in the constructions of conflict, survival, and escape. Non-official histories should not just be limited to dissent and confrontation, as emphasized in the Western mainstream. It is important to note, however, that the prevalence of conflict does not mean that stories and studies on the CR only represent trauma and catastrophe because slivers of history such as those embodied in memory—whether tumultuous or not—are to be studied in the context of China's history. Rather, accounts of conflict can reflect conditions and lived experiences that tell the story of the complex process of social change. With this, survival becomes an inevitable part of the storytelling process, as it pinpoints the human agency, and the lack thereof, by the memoirists living within the conditions of the revolution.

Collectively, the official and non-official histories of the CR provide a dynamic platform for engaging insights into China's history. The assertions and claims by both official and non-official histories elucidate the psychological investment in the reconstruction process of the past (Mukherjee et al., 2017) and the salient and critical contradictions (Schissler et al., 2017) founded within each.

4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Cultural Revolution memories remain as diverse as they are complex. The stories bring out varied lenses that consider multiple realities regardless of the disjunctions that ensue when personal accounts are read alongside one another. With this, readers can appreciate

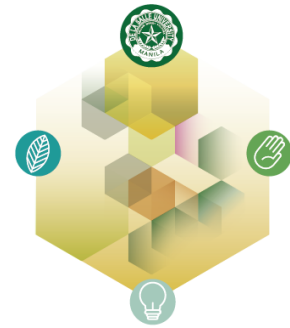
the memoirs as different recollections depicting slices of lives and moments during the CR.

Why do memoirs narrate? The memoir is a platform for asserting one's existence and experience during a specific period. Articulation becomes a way of reflection, self-development, and catharsis. Second, it is a means to register one's agency—a powerful message that allows the memoirist to contribute to existing narratives.

Why then should we study memoirs? The memoir is a historical artifact that speaks of both subjective and objective histories. Those who lived through the CR in China can and must own their narratives, as they are part of the larger picture. Memoirs underscore that while a few personal narratives may not represent the entire history of the CR and China, these nevertheless allow important reflections on the human experience within complex cultural, socio-economic, and political developments. In this sense, memoirs can aid more understanding of the nuances of the period as personal stories bring in bottom-up perspectives and a diversity of experiences.

Everyone's story matters as it contributes to the inclusivity of narrating the period. In the long run, developing the discourse on the CR facilitates a more informed appraisal of the period. Understanding can be better when eyewitness accounts are taken into account. After all, the CR was originally a movement of the Chinese people. This echoes Michel Bonnin (2007) in urging the development of a more emancipatory narrative through more knowledge and understanding of an astonishing and tragic period of world history.

CR experiences and perceptions by Filipinos are also worth investigating. This further begs the question of what Filipinos may learn from China from an outsider's perspective. Filipinos exiled to China, like Chito Sta. Romana, Jaime FlorCruz, Ericson Baculinao, and Mario Miclat witnessed an evolving China. Their individual circumstances and reasons, such as leaving the Philippines during the Marcos regime, allow them to narrate the story of the CR differently. As they observed China on the verge of opening up, they show that China's story is much larger than the traumatic experiences of the CR. Hence, such narratives could add to the discourse on the CR. The thousands of years of Chinese history characterized by political, social, cultural, and economic transformation provide insights into how other countries should consider their own reasons and attempts at change. As a comparative reflection, this essay also raises the significance of the Philippines looking into its own history, most notably its own experiences with revolutions. With the Philippines



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facing its own aspirations for change, perhaps further research can look into bottom-up accounts, studied alongside official history, to better appreciate the process (or lack of it) of coming to terms with contentions in collective memory and history. This permits Filipinos to have a deeper introspection of their past and their nationhood.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is derived from my master's thesis submitted to the University of the Philippines Asian Center back in January 2022. I would like to thank members of the thesis committee for their efforts in the development of this paper: Tina S. Clemente, Ph.D. (adviser), Dulce M. Natividad, Ph.D. (chair), and MCM Santamaria, LL.D. (reader-critic).

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