
Jung Chang: How I Became a Writer

Jung Chang, best-selling author of Wild Swans, captivates conference attendees with her incredible life story

After a heartfelt thank you on the WOI conference stage, Jung Chang starts right from the beginning.

"When I was a child I loved to write. I liked to stare at the clouds in the sky trying to imagine what was going on behind them," she says poetically.

But for a child growing up in Mao's China, the dream of becoming a writer was one that needed to remain "firmly imprisoned in the subconscious."

During the Cultural Revolution, books were burned and writers were persecuted. Even writing for oneself could be dangerous. "Mao had said that the more books you read the more stupid you become. That was the guideline for health and education in those years," she says.

Chang recalls her first literary venture on her 16th birthday which ended as quickly as it began. "I was writing my first poem in bed when I heard a loud banging on the door.

"My father's persecutors had come to raid our flat and I knew that if they saw my poem my family would get into trouble. So I quickly tore up my poem and rushed to the toilet to flush it away," she says exasperated.

In the years that followed, Chang was exiled to the edge of the Himalayas where she worked a number of backbreaking jobs ("Peasant, barefoot doctor, steel worker, electrician") that should've crushed any desire she had to write out of her. But childhood dreams die hard.

"As I spread manure in the paddy fields and checked the top of electricity poles, I never stopped writing in my head. I just couldn't put pen to paper," she says.

A turning point

Mao died in the fall of 1976. As China began to change, so did Chang's life. "For the first time in 1978, scholarships for going abroad were awarded on an academic basis, and



Jung Chang holds up her late grandmother's lotus shoe

I became part of the first group to leave China for an education in Britain," she says, smiling with pride.

Another significant first would come her way when, in 1982, Chang completed a PhD in linguistics from the University of York in England, becoming the first person from Communist China to get a doctorate from a British university.

Determined that the audience understand the magnitude of this achievement, she says, "I never saw a foreigner until I was 23, when as an English language student my classmates and I were sent to a port somewhere near



Hong Kong to practice our English with the foreign sailors.”

Surely now Chang’s literary career could begin? “Coming from an isolated China to London was like being in an incredible a new world where I could write whatever, whenever. But by then my desire to write had left me, because writing required looking inward and backward into a past which I wanted to forget all about,” she says.

Though the horror of Mao’s tyranny was over, the painful memories had an iron grip on Chang. “My father spoke publicly against the Cultural Revolution and was arrested, tortured, driven insane and exiled to a camp where he died prematurely as a result. My grandmother, who was really the person that brought us up, also died in the Cultural Revolution, and their deaths were painful spots in my heart that I didn’t want to revisit.”

Fulfilling a lifelong dream

It was only after Chang’s mother came from China to stay with her in London ten years later that she once again felt the familiar pinch of her childhood ambition. “For the first time in our lives she told me the stories of her life, of my grandmother and of her relationship with my father.

“And as I listened to my mother I kept saying to myself ‘I want to write all this down!’ Then I realized: I wanted to be a writer, I *always* wanted to be a writer. And it felt like my mother was helping me to fulfill this unspoken dream by telling me these stories,” she says, with a hint of emotion in her voice.

By the time Chang’s mother left London six months later, she had left Chang with 60 hours of tape recorded memoirs. And *Wild Swans* was born.

“Just before the book was about to be published I started to agonize over how it would be received as all writers probably do. Then my mother wrote me a letter saying the book might not do well, but she was not worried because she could feel that writing it had brought us closer together. She said I had made her a happy woman and that was enough,” she says.

So without the pressure of worrying about how the book might do, *Wild Swans* was published.

The award-winning book, which portrays over 100 years of Chinese history through the lives of three generations of women – Chang’s grandmother, Chang’s mother and Chang – has been translated into more than 40 languages and sold more than 15 million copies worldwide.

“My mother, who only wanted understanding from her daughter, now has understanding from tens of millions of readers all over the world. And I, at last, have become a writer.”