

# THE WILD SWAN WHO SURVIVED CHINA'S BLOODY TURMOIL ON HER NEW LIFE AS A MILLION-SELLER



by **TANYA REED**

**N**IGHT after night, for more than two years, tears dripped on to the paper as Jung Chang wrote the story of her family's struggle to survive in the turbulence of 20th Century China.

She wept openly as she recorded how her grandmother was forced to become a warlord's concubine when she was just 15 and how her parents, heroes of the Chinese Revolution, were later humiliated and tortured.

But although it was so painful to write, *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang's moving tribute to her mother and grandmother, has made her a household name in 23 countries.

*It has just become the first paperback work of non-fiction to sell more than a million copies in Britain since Rubik wrote You Can Do The Cube in 1981.*

And it has remained at number one in the best-seller list since it was published in paperback last June.

## Keen

Jung came here in 1978 after winning a government scholarship to improve her English.

"I could hardly speak English," says the 41-year-old writer. "I'd been completely cut off from the outside world. I never spoke to foreigners apart from some sailors in a port in South China once."

"We were sent to practise our English on them. We were so keen to talk to them, we waited in the bar and grabbed them as soon as they came in."

"We had no idea what must have been on their minds, how different this must have been from their expectation of port life."

*Her first days in Britain were spent wandering about greeting people with the British equivalent of the Chinese greeting: "Where are you going, have you eaten?"*

"I had never heard of Mick Jagger, Marilyn Monroe or Graham Greene," says Jung.

"Britain was a completely different world but I felt immediately at home."

"When I first came here, I often told friends bits and pieces of what happened in China and they all urged me to write about it."

"I made various attempts, but subconsciously I couldn't dig deep into my memory because a lot of things were too painful."

"I wrote a little bit, but it didn't work. But my mother visited in 1988 and her stories really triggered off my memories."

"I let my memory go. I

# A soft voice in the time of cruelty



Words of torment – Jung Chang's memoirs became a best-seller

ters from readers. Some write from hospital. So the book has made them stronger. Others thank her for helping them to understand their own parents and grandparents.

"One young woman vowed to make her marriage work after reading my book," says Jung.

But the person who has been most affected by the book is her mother, now 63 and still living in the Chinese town of Chengdu.

Photographers, journalists and tourists regularly visit her and next month she will join her daughter on a promotional visit to Japan.

*"Through the process of writing I became closer and closer to my mother," says Jung. "I found I understood her more, which was tremendous."*

Jung met her husband, writer and historian Jon Halliday, in the early Eighties when both were involved in making TV documentaries.

## Damage

Marrying him fulfilled a prophecy made in China that she would one day live in a foreign country with "a barbarian".

They live in Notting Hill, West London, surrounded by Chinese antiques – bought in London.

"In China, a lot of things were destroyed," she says.

"Our culture suffered tremendous damage in the last few decades."

"Anything beautiful was considered bourgeois. You find more Chinese antiques in London's Portobello Road than in any shop in China."

Now Jung and Jon are working on a biography of Chairman Mao.

"The theme of the book is how he did it – what made him tick," she says. "I want readers to go away saying they understand Mao. I want it to be as readable as *Wild Swans*."



Jung, second left, with her grandmother, centre, and mother

could finally face the terrible things that had happened.

"I had a lot of nightmares, memories of the past. But because of the kindness of society, I gradually shed my guard. You learn to trust people."

## Shame

Around the world, more than 10,000 copies of the book are sold every week.

Yet the Chinese authorities won't allow it to be published in Jung Chang's home country unless big changes are made.

"It's a terrible shame most Chinese know nothing about *Wild Swans*, especially as many families would have had similar experiences," says Jung.

"The bits they want to cut out are important bits, my thoughts. This is why I refused."

"When you write things down, there are often conclusions made, in one line or one word. In China, they wanted to cut the lines out that said everything."

Jung's mother, Bao Qin, joined the communists thinking they would put an end to hunger.

"Instead," says Jung, "they created their own

famine." And, during the Cultural Revolution of the Sixties under Chairman Mao, they turned on Bao Qin, forcing her to kneel on broken glass at "denunciation meetings" after she had been condemned for her so-called "bourgeois tendencies".

*Jung, once a Red Guard, a steelworker and an electrician, is as shell-shocked by the response to her book as she is by the events it portrays.*

Since the publication of *White Swans*, she has received thousands of let-



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