



## Wild Swans as Class Text

# Swans' Seduction in Teaching the Mao Era

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Although Jung Chang and John Halliday's recent book, *Mao: The Unknown Story* has sparked intense discussion in the academy, not many instructors have used it as a source in their teaching. It is Jung Chang's early publication, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* that has enjoyed greater popularity and become one of the most adopted texts in college classrooms since the early 1990s. I have also utilized *Wild Swans* as one of the main sources in my past teaching. Both the benefits it brought and the challenges it posed were obvious in my classroom.

The book has many advantages as a teaching source. Written in a novelistic style, the memoir smoothly weaves modern Chinese history into the lives of three generations of Chinese women. The family episodes are well carved and touching; the narrative is clear and eloquent, bringing "dry" history to life.

I chose *Wild Swans* for other specific reasons. The course I taught was History of the People's Republic of China, with no prerequisite. The stories of Jung Chang's grandmother and mother were able to serve as an introduction to both the old China of the early 20th century and the new China that began with the establishment of the Communist government. The family life she described before 1949 provided concrete examples

for us to learn about Chinese traditional culture. As Jung's grandmother's and mother's experiences are told against the backdrop of major historical events, I was able to design an assignment based upon their stories, asking the students to examine the issues and problems in Chinese society prior to 1949 before we moved into the Mao era.

When the class began to study the early period of the People's Republic, the story of Jung Chang's father became a useful illustration in our discussion of the challenges and problems the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) encountered after 1949. The author portrays her father as an upstanding party cadre, representative of those who selflessly devoted themselves to Communist ideals in the early years of the People's Republic. He battled against the corrupt officials outside of the family, on the one hand, and his wife within the family, on the other hand, so as to uphold the Party's principles. His story enabled me to construct another assignment, asking the students to examine the rising issues within the Chinese Communist Party after it turned into the ruling party after 1949, in conjunction with their reading of Wang Meng's short novel, *A New Young Man at the Organization Department*.

Although Jung Chang's father appeared as an archetypal Communist official in the book, his family inevitably enjoyed the many privileges ordinary

Chinese could never attain. For example, Jung Chang as a child lived in a spacious house inside of a guarded compound, went to a key middle school in the city, and received favorable treatment from her teachers. She was able to leave the countryside

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for factory work much earlier than did most sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution. She soon entered college, and then went to England shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It would be impossible to convince any knowledgeable Chinese person that each move of her career had nothing do with her family's "back-door" connections. The author's experience gives us a glimpse into the life of a privileged child growing up in family headed by a ranking official. This, I hoped, could help the students understand the emergence and development of a new elite class and bureaucratic state in the People's Republic.

Finally, the book was a source for my class to discuss the impact of the Cultural Revolution upon the Chinese people. The narrative of Chang's family episodes follows the unfolding events closely. The hardships the parents endured exemplified

the experience of many, including party cadres, intellectuals, and others. Jung Chang's own encounters enabled the students to have a close look at the experience of Chinese youth during the Cultural Revolution.

The memoir was indeed the most popular reading among all of my texts, and the students loved it. As most of them were of white European descent growing up in rural Wisconsin, with little knowledge of China, I could see that *Wild Swans* contributed significantly to their increased interest in China and Chinese history. However, the students' interest was accompanied by a number of pedagogical challenges. Though a handy source for various discussion topics, the book did not help achieve much of what I had wished the students would have achieved.

### Problems Unfold with the Text

As many of us may agree, though its tone is much more measured in comparison with *Mao: The Unknown Story*, *Wild Swans* obviously has no intention of addressing the complexity of Mao as a historical figure or treating the Mao era as one of the phases in China's continuous struggle for modernization. To assist the students in acquiring a good understanding of Communist victory in 1949, I found that additional readings were needed. What the students obtained from Chang's book was an understanding of the problems of China and of an incompetent Guomindang regime, but they did not learn much about why the CCP won its victory.

More problems appeared when we began to examine the Mao era after 1949. The father's story did not help the students develop a critical view of rising issues within the Party and the government. Jung Chang's description of constant conflict between her mother and her father, their argument as to whether the family or the party came first, seemed to strengthen some students' pre-conceived view of the CCP and the PRC. Influenced by Jung Chang, they were generally sympathetic to the mother. They believed that all her mother asked for was reasonable and that her father's insistence on the party's principles made no sense, if not being completely self-serving. They did not see that it was exactly the power abused by party officials and their families, along with other types of corruption, nepotism, and bureaucratism,

that caused tremendous problems to the CCP as it became a ruling party.

In our discussion of the Cultural Revolution, Jung Chang's depiction of her family experience in those years led many students to jump to quick conclusion: Mao was China's Hitler. A student of mine was quite representative when she wrote: "As an American, I knew very little about Mao. I had only seen his name printed among the other notorious 20th century killers like Hitler, Lenin and Stalin." *Wild Swans* certainly bolstered this existing image among my students.

But I wanted to show the students a multifaceted Mao era. I assigned, for example, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*, by Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, and alternatively, *The Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader*, by Huang Shu-min. Chinese rural life during the Mao era in these two monographs demonstrated many diverse and complicated relationships between public politics, peasants' interest, family feuds, clan connections, and village religious life. The two books also make an excellent connection between the Mao era and the post-Mao reform era. However, it seemed that, captivated by *Wild Swans*, many students did not fully grasp the links between the eras.

We instructors all agree that we ought to challenge our students intellectually, expose them to various controversies and sources, and help them to make intelligent judgments. Yet, we also have our own views and interpretations, and we want the students to grasp the messages we want them to take home. The teaching sources we select undoubtedly make a difference. Many recollections, eyewitness accounts, and memoirs regarding the Mao era have been published in the last three decades.

The value of these works is that the authors have had their own experiences with the historical eras they described; they integrate large historical events into their personal stories, and the narratives are usually vivid and moving.

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works, shaped by strong personal biases, portray the Mao era as a dark age if nothing else.<sup>1</sup> If instead we want our students to acquire a broad historical perspective and see many entangled social and cultural dimensions of the Mao era, we may have to be very careful about adopting them as teaching materials.

Different from *Mao: the Unknown Story*, which launches a bold all-out as-

sault on Mao Zedong and therefore has instantly driven away many instructors, *Wild Swans* reads more like the moans of a beautiful, victimized swan and is very appealing to many. Its soft, sentimental tone is seductive, and it takes his story at face value students will easily be led into accepting a one-sided view of Mao's China. *Wild Swans* is surely useful in teaching about China. However, it may serve us better if we utilize it for upper-level classes, where our main job is to tackle the different perspectives in studying modern China or the Mao era.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>In the recent years, other recollections have been published that, taking issues with the mainstream dark age narratives, intend to provide a multidimensional view of the Mao era. For examples, see Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, ed. *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001; Ye Weili with Ma Xiaodong, *Growing Up in The People's Republic: Conversations between Two Daughters of China's Revolution*, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.