

REVIEW: WILD SWANS: THREE DAUGHTERS OF CHINA BY JUNG CHANG

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In this saga, Jung Chang opens the door into the intimate lives of four generations of women. In *Wild Swans*, she covers the era of warlords and concubines (1920s) through the ideals of communism and life under Mao, to the break-up of the “Gang of Four” (1970s). How easy it is to fall under the spell of a tyrant. How hard it is to reverse the course of history. For equality between the sexes and classes, the Chinese embraced communism under Mao, but classes of another kind emerged and gains on all early fronts lost. Yet, *Wild Swans* is story of survival of a family with the resilience to endure history.

“At the age of fifteen my grandmother became the concubine of a warlord general...” so the story begins. The girl had no say in the arrangements made for her father to advance his own career. We don’t learn her name; she’s always referred to as “my great-grandmother.” And this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. She is the first of a quartet of strong women, resilient and independent within the cultural constraints of the various “times.”

Under Mao, China was closed; the Great Wall might just as well have ringed the entire country. Citizens’ travel was forbidden and foreign travellers barred. The brainwashed people closed their minds to everything but Mao’s initial promises, and slowly the terror rained down upon them. Through Chang’s evocative details and harrowing family experiences, we slip into her time and place.

Wild Swans is really two stories: one personal; the other political. In one of the early personal descriptions. These women are actors as much as they are acted upon—despite the stifling times in which they lived.

The U.S. reference is with respect to its support of the Kuomintang, Mao and communism’s first enemy. Chang’s family embraced communism and the equality it promised, both across class and for women. But they became disillusioned. At the end of Mao’s reign, Chang sums up his impact on China: “...Mao destroyed much of the country’s cultural heritage. He left behind not only a brutalized nation, but also an ugly land with little of its past glory remaining or appreciated.” *Wild Swans* is a story of survival through desperate struggles, including starvation and unimaginable cruelty. It is also a cautionary tale about the slippery slope leading to loss of morality and the horrendous impact on individual lives.

Structure and Content

The book is divided into three parts, each focusing on one generation:

1. **Grandmother** – A concubine to a warlord, her life reflects the traditional, patriarchal society of pre-revolutionary China.
2. **Mother** – A devout Communist who rises in the Party ranks, only to be later disillusioned by Mao’s tyranny and the Cultural Revolution.
3. **Jung Chang** – Born into the Party elite, she experiences the horrors of Mao’s rule firsthand before eventually escaping to the West and becoming a writer

Themes

- **Female Resilience and Resistance:** The three women endure and resist the oppressive forces of patriarchy, dictatorship, and political ideology.
- **Political Disillusionment:** Chang illustrates how many Chinese citizens, including her parents, were idealistic supporters of Mao—only to suffer under his regime.

- **Family and Identity:** Through intimate detail, the story weaves family loyalty with the trauma of betrayal, censorship, and ideological conflict.
- **Historical Witnessing:** It is not just a family saga but also a testimony to the brutality and absurdity of totalitarian rule.

Strengths

- **Rich Historical Context:** The book vividly portrays the impacts of major events—such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—through personal experience.
- **Engaging Narrative Style:** Despite its historical weight, the prose is compelling and accessible, reading more like a novel than a dry historical account.
- **Emotional Depth:** The emotional honesty and moral complexity give the book powerful human resonance.

Conclusion

Some critics, particularly from within China, have argued the book is too harsh on Mao and the Communist Party. It remains banned in mainland China. However, others see this as evidence of its unflinching honesty. *Wild Swans* is a masterpiece of biography and historical memoir. It's both an act of remembrance and a searing indictment of authoritarianism. Anyone interested in China, women's history, or political memoirs should consider it essential reading.
