



English: Personal Experiences

Jung Chang

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I was born in mainland China. My first language is Mandarin. I learned English actually quite late when I was 21 in 1973. And it was in the Cultural Revolution and universities or, you know, anywhere you could learn foreign language had been closed for seven years since 1966. And so I hadn't had the opportunity to learn English when I was a child. I, I went into secondary school. There was an English lesson but soon the school, normal schooling was stopped. Schools were closed and the teachers were denounced for teaching English.

When I was growing up and it was under Mao, you know Mao Zedong the tyrant of China in the 1950's and the 60's. And China was totally isolated from the outside world. And when I was growing up we never saw a foreigner and when the boys played guerrilla warfare which was like their Cowboys and the Indians. The bad guys would always have rose thorns glued onto their noses to show they were foreigners. And the bad guys would say "hello" all the time. Because in propaganda films evil foreigners were always drinking coca-cola and saying hello, so we all thought hello was a swear word.

When I was learning English again there were no foreigners. China was still closed, particularly Sichuan, the province where I came from which had lots of arms industries and was totally closed to foreigners. So in 1975 at the age of 23 I was sent to a port in South China with my, sort of fellow students to practice English with foreign sailors. And as far as we were concerned this was our only chance ever to, you know, to see a foreigner and speak English. We were so keen to talk to them. We would be sitting in the only bar and restaurant eagerly awaiting our sailors and we would grab them as soon as they came on shore. And of course we had no idea what must be on their minds and how different this must be from their expectation of port life. Text books had been written by teachers who had never seen foreigners before. So they were direct translations of Chinese language texts. Because in those days when the Chinese met each other we said, (*speaks Chinese*) which means, where are you going? Have you eaten? So those were the English greetings I learned. So when I first came to London I used to go around and ask people, where they were going and whether they had eaten. When I arrived in London, you know, London was like another planet. Everything was very different but I immediately felt at home. I, by then I could read you know, quite a bit, but my spoken English was very, very little.

In those days we were under very tight control and we were told you mustn't do this, that and the other. We couldn't go out alone. We had to move in a group. We were all wearing this Mao suits, this sort of a blue uniform like costume and we were quite a sight in the London streets. One place we were particularly told we, you must not go, was the English pub

because in Chinese the translation for pub is (*speaks Chinese*) which in those days suggested somewhere indecent with nude women gyrating. But of course I was torn with curiosity. I knew there was a pub across the road from the college where I was. So one day I sneaked out of the college, I darted across the road, I, I pushed the door of the pub open and I walked in. Of course I saw nothing of the kind only some old men sitting there drinking beer. I was rather disappointed of course. When I was growing up it was impossible to, to even dream of being a writer. Because to be a writer was the most dangerous profession. Most writers in China were condemned, sent to the Gulag, driven to suicide or executed even. So I, you know, even to write privately was dangerous. I wrote my first poem in 1968 on my sixteenth birthday. And I had to quickly rush to the toilet to tear up the poem and flush it down the toilet because my father's persecutors had come to raid our flat. And it was dangerous if my, if they found my poem.

When I came to Britain and, in this world where I was free to write, the desire to write left me. Because to write for me would mean to turn inward and to look at my past which I didn't want to look at because it, it was so painful. So I didn't want to be a writer. And then in 1988 when my mother came to stay with me and when she told me the stories of her life and that of my grandmother I realised that, you know, how much I wanted to be a writer and I started writing. By then I had been in Britain for ten years and then I decided to write in English.