

## DR JUNG CHANG GRADUATE SCHOOL LECTURE SARAH PARKER



Those that attended Dr Jung Chang's guest lecture on the 20 November, 2008 will already know what an inspiring, thought-provoking evening we were treated to. For those that were not in attendance, keep reading to find out what exactly you missed.

The evening kicked off with research poster presentations by postgraduate students in the foyer of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. Personally, I was a bit daunted at the

prospect of members of the public, who were there primarily to see the famous author of *Wild Swans*, quizzing me about my research. This was also my first attempt at making a research poster, and I wondered if this would be patently obvious once it was placed alongside the work of Powerpoint veterans.

Fortunately, it was such an encouraging experience to see in pictorial form the intriguing research being undertaken by fellow postgraduates at Birmingham that I forgot to be worried about my own effort. Topics as diverse as Confucius, hydrogen, graphic novels and Ancient Egyptian civilisation do not begin to do justice to the variety of work that was on offer. As people gradually began to crowd into the foyer, the air filled with enthusiastic conversation. It was heartening to be able to discuss my work with students from completely different academic disciplines and members of the public, many of whom offered helpful suggestions.

But what does postgraduate research, however exciting, have to do with Dr Jung Chang? Dr Chang was ostensibly at Birmingham by invitation of the Graduate School to talk about "the impact of postgraduate education on her career." However, many ticket-holders also wanted to hear about her best-selling books, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1992) and *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005, co-written with her husband, historian Jon Halliday), and her early life in Communist China.

Jung Chang's lecture exceeded everyone's expectations. She began by telling us about her childhood desire to become a writer, explaining how this became increasingly difficult to realise as Mao's regime overtook China (her first poem had to be torn up and flushed down the toilet as Communist guards invaded her house). As she detailed to the audience the traumas suffered by her family and the Chinese people under Mao, Jung Chang somehow managed to be both a commanding speaker and touchingly conspiratorial. For example, on leaving China in 1978 to study at the University of York, Jung Chang was warned that English pubs contained "all kinds of vice" including "topless, dancing women." Intrigued, she told us how when first in England, she rushed to open a pub door, only to discover some old men nursing beers: "to tell the truth, I was rather disappointed," she admitted with a smile.

Once settled in England, Jung Chang began her Ph.D. in Linguistics, later becoming the first person from Communist China to receive a doctorate from a British university. In her first supervision, she presented her supervisor with her thesis

argument in a characteristically strong-minded manner. After a pause, he asked her: “So where *is* your thesis then?” Taken aback, Jung Chang reminded him it was her first year, so she had not begun writing one yet. He replied: “But you seem to have all the answers.”

This anecdote embodies the overarching message of Jung Chang’s lecture, which was the importance of keeping an open mind. Her thoughts, as they ranged from Mao’s regime to her career as a writer, kept returning to this point: don’t take anything for granted, or – in the words of her supervisor, which obviously had a deep effect on her – don’t assume you have all the answers. Dr Chang’s lecture, and her perceptive answers to the questions put to her by members of the audience, certainly proved the worth of this doctrine. By turns moving, stimulating and entertaining, Jung Chang’s lecture was certainly not to be missed.