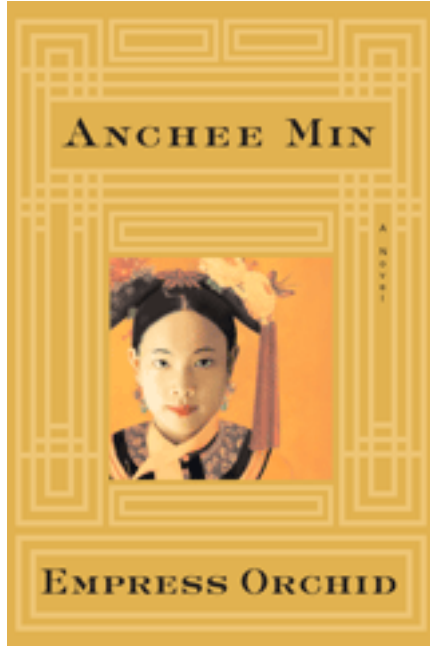


Press Release



Empress Orchid

by Anchee Min

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"An insightful, magnetic, and quietly revolutionary portrait of a remarkable woman." — *Booklist*, starred and boxed review

About the Book

Anchee Min continues her mission to tell the truth about China and its past in her second groundbreaking work of historical fiction, *Empress Orchid* (Houghton Mifflin, February 3, 2004). As she did in her national bestseller *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), Min offers a corrective to the traditional portrait of one of China's most hated women. In a novel based on years of research that included documents Min smuggled from the Forbidden City, *Empress Orchid* tells the story of Tzu Hsi, China's longest-reigning female ruler and its last Empress. For decades Chinese schoolchildren have been taught that Empress Orchid was "a mastermind of pure evil and intrigue," but Min presents a strong-willed, utterly compelling woman who used her beauty to become a concubine of the Emperor and her brains to become his confidante and lover.

In the 1850s, when Orchid and her family make their way to Peking, the opium trade with Europe and peasant rebellions are chiseling away at the power of the Chi'ing Dynasty. Emperor Hsien Feng, a frail young man overwhelmed by the demands of state, must choose his Empress and concubines. Orchid is the daughter of an aristocratic but impoverished family. With an empty belly and chilled bones, she dreams of an easy life within the walls of the Forbidden City. Orchid enters the Emperor's "contest," open to all women of full Manchu blood. To her surprise, she is chosen as a low-ranking concubine.

History becomes art in Min's descriptions of life at court. From the sumptuous craftsmanship of each palace to the beauty of the imperial gardens, from the delicate flowers Orchid

cultivates to the crickets and birds kept to induce tranquillity, the Forbidden City is a world at one with nature. In exquisite detail, Min describes Orchid's priceless silk robes and jewels and the intricate hairstyles her maids fashion for her each day. She is surrounded by inexpressible beauty, but her sharp mind and passionate body yearn for fulfillment. "Women in China dreamed about becoming me without knowing my suffering," Orchid says. "By identifying with the eunuchs, I tended my heart's wound. The eunuchs' pain was written on their faces. They had been gelded and everyone understood their misfortune. But mine was hidden."

Life in the Forbidden City is hierarchical, highly structured, full of suffocating tradition and endless waiting — Orchid must wear formal dress and makeup every day, in case the Emperor should call. For months she sits in her palace waiting for the call. When she finally wins the Emperor's attention, after scheming with her trusted eunuch, she becomes the target of thousands of other women trying just as hard to claw their way into his presence. Bribery, betrayal, even murder are the weapons used. When, in failing health, the Emperor requests Orchid's help with affairs of state, his advisers resist her at every turn and eventually plot to have her buried alive.

In 1856 Orchid gives birth to the Emperor's only son, Tung Chih, and in 1861, in the Emperor's official decree after his death, she is named Empress Dowager at the tender age of twenty-six and inherits an empire on the verge of collapse. Min deftly describes Orchid's power struggles and the defiance she encounters from the Emperor's board of regents, whose only expectation of a woman is compliance. She and her son are kidnapped and the British destroy Peking, but Orchid is able to defeat the regents and create her own government, which will rule for forty-six years.

Chinese tradition teaches that "women are like grass, born to be stepped on." Anchee Min has made it her life's work to overturn this tradition. In *Empress Orchid* the woman she portrays is totally at odds with history's rendering. By showing Orchid's strengths and the efforts she made to save China, Min quietly but defiantly challenges the current regime's assertion that it has been China's only savior. With her skillful writing and precise research, Min shows Orchid to be a passionate woman, a loving mother, and a pioneer of reform — a woman as vibrant and tormented as China itself.

About the Author

Born in Shanghai in 1957, Anchee Min was seventeen when she was sent to a Communist labor farm so poorly managed that the workers had to steal food from the fields just to survive. After three years on the farm, her working-class looks led talent scouts to recruit her for a role in one of Madame Mao's future propaganda films. When Madame Mao was denounced after the Cultural Revolution and sentenced to death shortly after Mao Zedong's funeral, Min was declared one of her followers by the new regime. As a punishment, she was ordered back to the labor farm and then sent to work at menial labor in Shanghai, a sentence that lasted for eight years. She came to the United States in 1984.

Her memoir *Red Azalea* was named a New York Times Notable Book of 1994 and became an international bestseller, with rights sold in twenty countries. Her first novel, *Katherine*, was published in 1997; her second, *Wild Ginger* (Houghton Mifflin), in 2002. *Becoming Madame*

Mao (2000, Houghton Mifflin), a national bestseller, was written after Min had done three years of research in China and the United States.

Min leaves the Cultural Revolution behind for the first time in *Empress Orchid*, a wrenching novel of power and alienation during one of the most tumultuous periods in Chinese history — its forced opening to the West. With details drawn from painstaking research, Min's groundbreaking and "quietly revolutionary" (*Booklist*) story tells about the rise to power of China's longest-reigning female ruler and last Empress.

Anchee Min lives just outside San Francisco, California.

A Conversation with Anchee Min

Q) You did extensive research for *Becoming Madame Mao* and lived through the Cultural Revolution in China, which added a special intensity to your description. Did similar experiences inform *Empress Orchid*?

A) Details are extremely important to me. The most challenging thing has been to get the facts and get them right. There are sometimes several contrasting versions of a single incident involving Empress Orchid, and many sources are false or inaccurate. I went through documents not only in the Forbidden City, but also medical, accounting, and police records. My reading on the lives of eunuchs, maids, palace tutors, Imperial warlords, and generals helped me gain crucial perspective. The Empress's food and herb manuals and her opera manuals also revealed a lot about her character.

Q) Remarkably, you and your father were able to smuggle documents out of government-guarded storerooms in Beijing. Would you describe how it happened?

A) Well, I had to get my hands on the facts, but no official in Beijing would risk his career to open the door for me. So I tried the "back door." I can't say more than this, because I don't want to get the person who helped me in trouble. Anyway, I got in. The place where all the ancient documents are stored is treated with strong chemicals, so I was told not to stay inside for more than half an hour. But I didn't want to leave. I read the Empress's original decrees until I was choking on the fumes. But I was glad I stayed. The evidence was so compelling that she was a fitter ruler than anyone else of that time. There was a reason her regime lasted for forty-six years.

Q) Your seamlessly real depiction of the Forbidden City transports the reader inside its palaces and gardens. How was Orchid's life there defined — and confined — by its traditions?

A) What affected her most was that she knew she was a woman, a concubine. Any wrong move would cost her her life. The price of her survival was a lot of personal sacrifice and suffering. For example, she was a passionate woman, widowed at the age of twenty-six. She was forbidden from ever having a relationship with a man. She had to fight her need for intimacy, denying her own humanity. As with everything else in her life, such as her effort to revive China, she failed, but her struggle was heroic. She kept China in one piece until she died.

Q) What are Chinese schoolchildren taught about Empress Orchid? And how do history books around the world remember her?

A) She was considered "the enemy of the human race." In China, children learn that the collapse of every dynasty was the fault of the concubine. The execution of the concubine justified whatever was wrong. That's the tradition. The most recent example was Madame Mao. She was sentenced to death, while her husband was seen as the George Washington of China. Children are taught that the Empress was responsible for destroying China's two-thousand-year Imperial culture. Chinese and Western history books remember her negatively too, but the books provide very few facts.

Q) Empress Orchid and Madame Mao are both powerful personalities with a great deal in common. What characteristics drew you to them, and do you share those characteristics yourself?

A) I do. I am female and Chinese, and at a very young age I learned that my culture disfavors females. Books hold up women as negative examples, such as Madame Mao and Empress Orchid. I was drawn to these figures because I like to find out the truth. It started with *Red Azalea*, my first book, about growing up during the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government's official version of the Cultural Revolution contrasted with the life I had lived. I could not let the lies be the only record. It scared me to think that my daughter would be studying false history, and I felt obligated to do something about it.

Q) Some of your writing is critical of China — past and present. Has the Chinese government taken an "official position" on you? What has your experience been when visiting your family in China each year?

A) China's policy toward me is "We don't want to make an enemy of Anchee Min, but we don't have to promote her, either." My family in China has concerns. But as long as there are no Chinese versions of my books, they feel safe.

Q) The conclusion of *Empress Orchid* is "the end of the beginning" and leaves your audience begging for a sequel. Can you give us an idea of what happens next?

A) After she was widowed, Tsu Hsi ruled for forty-six years. The material about this time is absolutely fascinating. She was forced to learn many things, including diplomacy. Keep in mind that China in the late 1800s had been closed to outsiders for more than two thousand years. Westerners were trying to force their way into the opium trade. Meanwhile, domestic rebels, the Boxers, wanted to overthrow the dynasty. The Empress performed a delicate balancing act, and as a result she single-handedly held the dynasty together. My next book will reveal more of her private character. She was a great politician, a clever strategist, and a caring mother and lover.

Praise for the National Bestseller *Becoming Madame Mao*

"A wild, passionate, fearless American writer" — *New York Times*

"Anchee Min's exquisite new novel unfolds like a ribbon of gleaming, luminous silk —

soothing in its beauty, mesmerizing in its variations, startling, delightful and ultimately transformative in a way that only the best works of art can aspire to be . . . an astonishing journey into China's recent past." — *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Extraordinary . . . with operatic grace, Min portrays Madame Mao as a vindictive power monger whose apparent heartlessness is countered by a craving for love. Min lets her be seen as never before. Bottom line: Riveting novel." — *People*

"Part love story, part political epic, *Becoming Madame Mao* stunningly reveals the haughty beauty who emerged from her early struggles to become the most powerful, feared, and ultimately despised woman in China." — *Elle*

"Bold, innovative . . . Min does a fine job of presenting Madame Mao unvarnished." — *Mirabella*

"In this convincing, nuanced portrait of a damaged personality, Min makes it clear that Madame Mao never had as great a role as the one she wrote for herself and played in her own skin. (A-)" — *Entertainment Weekly*

"Dazzling . . . makes history sensual." — *US Weekly*

"In brief, urgent vignettes moving loosely between the first and third person, Min has written what might be called an imaginary memoir, an evocation of a woman who was by turns larger than life and viciously small-minded . . . 'For those who are fascinated by me you owe me applause, and for those who are disgusted you may spit,' Madame Mao announces as the curtain is about to fall. Anchee Min has clearly felt both urges, and, through her imagination, so do we." — Janice Nimura, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"A magnificent book: consequential; significant; beautiful. The book has everything in its favor. The story is gripping. The style is simple and graceful. The themes — love, war, conquest, domination, violence, feminism, communism, individualism and power — are sweeping . . . The true heroine is writer Anchee Min." — *San Diego Union-Tribune*

"An engaging historical novel . . . Her characterization of Madame Mao is so strong that one may tend to forget that this work is a novel and not a true biography." — *Library Journal* (starred)

"Min's tale of a woman with too much power in a world that completely lacks stability is nothing less than brilliant." — Kristine Huntley, *Booklist* (starred)

"Historical fiction acquires new luster and credibility in Min's brilliant evocation of the woman who married Mao and fought to succeed him . . . highly dramatic, psychologically penetrating and provocative narrative . . . it is her trenchant comments about the ways in which powerful individuals can paint bold colors on the panorama of history that distinguishes her spellbinding novel." — *Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"This colorful treatment of a woman whose ruthless power would earn her notoriety as China's 'White-Boned Demon' is the type of approach one would expect from Min . . . Min paints the moment. Ambition and attraction sound a mutual chord. The final emergence of Madame Mao has begun." — *Denver Post*

"Anchee Min, in her brilliant, poetic novel, has personalized that mythical figure, Madame Mao, and in the process has transformed both the woman and the myth, creating as if by magic a modern archetype with a concrete, lived existence here on earth. We will never imagine Madame Mao the same way again. This is historical fiction of the first order." — Russell Banks

"This is an audacious but balanced narrative of a mean-spirited woman's life caught in desire, ambition, and political intrigues. With vivid drama and keen psychological acumen, Anchee Min has rendered the White-Boned Demon human — Madame Mao is finally given her own voice. A remarkable accomplishment." — Ha Jin

"Anchee Min has created a fascinating portrait of one of the most important and powerful women of the twentieth century. *Becoming Madame Mao* is a remarkable literary and historical achievement." — Lisa See

"Anchee Min, in her brilliant, poetic novel, has personalized that mythical figure, Madame Mao, and in the process has transformed both the woman and the myth, creating as if by magic a modern archetype with a concrete, lived existence here on earth." — Paul West