

Press Release



Becoming Madame Mao

by Anchee Min

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"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 and the lives of its most noted leaders." —*Los Angeles Times*

"Sheer poetry." —*Wall Street Journal*

"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 Magazine*

"Anchee Min has rendered the White-Boned Demon human—Madame Mao is finally given her own voice. A remarkable accomplishment." —Ha Jin, author of *Waiting*

Introduction

Anchee Min's novel *Becoming Madame Mao* "is a magnificent book: consequential; significant; beautiful. 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," writes the *San Diego Union Tribune*. In Min's skillful hands, the "white-boned demon," as Madame Mao is known, is given flesh and blood. The myths surrounding her are systematically unraveled to reveal a woman motivated by ambition, fueled by revenge, and tortured by her unrequited love for Mao Tse-tung.

To millions Madame Mao Jiang Ching is evil personified; she has been erased from China's history books. In *Becoming Madame Mao*, Anchee Min resurrects her in a sweeping story that moves gracefully from the intimately personal to the great stage of world history. Every character existed in real life and Mao's letters and poems have been translated from original documents. These facts and Min's personal experiences with Jiang Ching and her closest advisors help to create a story that redefines forever Mao's fourth wife—one of the most interesting women of the twentieth century.

The novel begins in 1919 with Yunhe, a four-year-old girl born to a rural concubine who defiantly refuses to have her feet bound. Again and again the mother tells the girl that "females are like grass, born to be stepped on," but the girl doesn't listen and throughout her life clings to the belief that she is "a peacock among hens." After abandoning an arranged marriage and being abandoned in another marriage, Yunhe runs away to Shanghai to become an actress and renames herself Lan Ping. In her new identity she pursues roles on stage and screen but never gets out of B-movies or second-tier operas. Another failed marriage leads her to the role of patriot and she joins the Red Army. She is sent to the mountainous region of Yen-an where, in 1934, she meets and seduces the charismatic war hero Mao. She wins him for a time in an erotically charged and passionate affair. They marry and he renames her Jiang Chiang, but soon after their marriage her jealousy, the machinations of Mao's trusted aides, and Mao's own loss of interest cast her into limbo. By then a veteran of the inner circle betrayals that Mao encouraged, Jiang Ching attempts to wrest personal power, but it becomes her undoing.

"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," writes the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "'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."

Jiang Ching was beloved by the Chinese people as the driving force behind the proletarian operas and films that inspired millions. As an architect of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and supposed murderer of Mao, she was despised and sentenced to death. Despite being a victim herself of the Cultural Revolution, Anchee Min felt it was her job as a writer to understand Jiang Ching as a human being. "In truth," says Min, "she was an early feminist who was caught up in the whirlpool of Mao's political and personal life." In *Becoming Madame Mao* she opens Jiang Ching's soul for all to see—the good and the bad—and gives voice to a conflicted, impassioned woman who has been pitifully rubbed out of history.

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 the lead role in Madame Mao's future propaganda films. It was at the Shanghai Film Studio that Anchee Min met members of Jiang Ching's circle who later provided Min with stories and insight. When Madame Mao was denounced for murdering her husband—a crime she did not commit—and sentenced to death shortly after Mao's funeral, Min was declared one of her followers by the new regime. As punishment she was ordered back to the labor farm and then to work as a set clerk at the Shanghai Film Studio, a sentence that lasted for eight years. She came to the United States in 1984 with the help of actress Joan Chen.

Her memoir, *Red Azalea*, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 1994 and was an international bestseller, with rights sold in twenty countries. Her first novel, *Katherine*, was published in 1997. *Becoming Madame Mao*, a national bestseller, was written after three years of research done in China and the United States. Min's next novel, *Wild Ginger*, will be published by Houghton Mifflin in Spring 2002. She is currently researching another work of historical fiction about the last Empress Dowager.

Anchee Min lives in Los Angeles, California.

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