

A Reader's Guide



Becoming Madame Mao

by Anchee Min

- [About the Book](#)
- [Q & A with Anchee Min](#)
- [Timeline of Modern Chinese History](#)

"Nothing less than brilliant." —*ALA Booklist* starred & boxed review

"Historical fiction acquires new luster and credibility in Min's brilliant evocation of the woman who married Mao and fought to succeed him...[a] spellbinding novel." —*Publishers Weekly* starred & boxed review

"Brilliant. We will never imagine Madame Mao the same way again. This is historical fiction of the first order." —Russell Banks, author of *Cloudsplitter*

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

About the Book

Anchee Min's new novel, *Becoming Madame Mao* (Mariner Books), is a triumph of historical fiction. 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 Zedong.

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 the protagonists' letters and poems have been translated from original documents. These facts and Min's personal experiences with Jiang Ching and her closest advisers 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 her 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 and 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 Yenan, 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 Ching, 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 now a veteran of the inner-circle betrayals that Mao encouraged, Jiang Ching attempts to gain personal power, but it becomes her undoing.

Min fluidly details her heroine's series of love affairs and marriages, divorces and acrimonious partings, roles in China's operas and movies, endurance in the shadow of Mao's disfavor, desperate ploys to regain his attention, and brief time in the limelight during the Cultural Revolution. As a chronicle of ambition, betrayal, murder, revenge, barbaric cruelty, paranoia, and internecine rivalry, the narrative races from 1919 to 1991. But *Becoming Madame Mao* "is foremost a character study of a determined, vindictive, rage-filled, cruel, and emotionally needy woman," writes *Publishers Weekly*, "who flourished because she reinvented herself as an actress in different self-defined roles — and because China was ready for her."

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, however, she was despised and sentenced to death. Despite being a victim 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*, Min 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 rubbed out of history.

Q & A with Anchee Min

Q) Why did you write this book?

A) I believe Madame Mao deserves a more decent place in the history books. She had a strong influence over my entire generation, especially women, and yet she has been officially wiped out of Chinese history. She is called a "white-boned demon." But in truth she was an early feminist who was caught up in the whirlpool of Mao's political and personal life. As a writer, I felt it was my job to make an effort to understand Jiang Ching as a human being. I tried to delve behind the myth and see who she really was.

Q) Why is this a historical novel and not a biography?

A) The historical facts of her life fascinated me, and after three years of research, the characters began to sound themselves out in my head. The style came to me naturally. With solid history as a foundation, I was able to build up the story with confidence. The original material was so rich and exciting that it enabled me to visualize Mao and Jiang Ching as a man and a woman, walking in time toward each other, leaning on each other. They touched and fell in love. They entered the cave at Yen-an and closed the door tightly behind them. And here — here is where the historians are shut out.

What happened? What could have happened? The love affair of the century, a passionate actress and a great warrior and poet? Here is where I entered as a novelist. I just opened the door and lunged in. I had such a good time exploring and tracing the possible events, forging links between the hard facts and other assumptions. My imagination was fueled by the couple's correspondence and poems. I could hear their voices speaking through me: the sound of their pillow talk, their heavy breathing, their laughter, arguments, and cries.

Q) Did you have any personal connection with Madame Mao?

A) Yes. Our paths crossed in an extraordinary set of circumstances. I grew up with her revolutionary operas — all Communist brainwashing, of course. But the irony is, she had a lot to do with my becoming a willful, independent woman. Her political operas had an impact on me. They represented her idea of a modern woman, and the idealized characters mirrored the images of her own life. The female protagonists were portrayed as leaders. They were courageous, although as I see it now, they were also deprived of love and intimacy. I was able to recite every one of Madame Mao's operas from beginning to end. I modeled myself after her heroines during my teens.

Madame Mao was about to inherit Mao's empire after his death in 1976 and was shooting a propaganda film (sort of like a campaign commercial) to help ease her way into power. She was looking for a working-class girl to play her leading role, and I happened to be chosen from a labor camp by her talent scouts. After I was taken to Shanghai, the Film Studio trained me to act and I went through a lot of screen tests. But the film was never completed, because Madame Mao was overthrown shortly after Mao's funeral. She was denounced and sentenced to death. I was declared Madame Mao's follower, and as punishment I was forced to work as a set clerk on temporary contracts at the Shanghai Film Studio for eight years. The only positive outcome was that in the process of clearing my name, I ended up obtaining some first-hand material about her life. I investigated and spent time with her friends and enemies to learn the truth.

Q) Do you admire Madame Mao?

A) That's a hard question to answer. Madame Mao was a strong woman in a culture and an environment where women were not allowed to be strong. She experienced pain early. Her rebellious character was formed when her feet were bound. She took control of her life by ripping off the cloth. I can't say that I don't admire her at this point; it's what she did later that I despise. Her life was a real - life soap opera, with all the elements of love, betrayal, and tragedy. The heartbreaking part is that she let her frustration corrupt her soul. Without being conscious of her actions — she thought she was doing China good—she let her

ambition be the only ruling factor, which led to the nation's destruction.

Q) Do you feel that she is misunderstood somehow?

A) Yes. There is a big part of her character that is misunderstood. People have a problem believing that she and Mao were once in love. How can a demon be in love? Or know love the way we humans do? The general population in China — and historians — believe that she seduced Mao and that's why Mao failed China. She is held responsible for Mao's poor judgment, his decisions, his actions. In my view this is nothing but a Chinese cliché — the downfall of every dynasty was the fault of a woman. Today Mao's portrait hangs high at the Gate of Tianenmen Square in Beijing and he is considered by many to be China's George Washington, while his wife of 38 years was denounced and sentenced to death.

Q) Were you in China when she was sentenced?

A) Yes. At the trial she shouted, "Long live Maoism!" She didn't believe that she was destroying China. Quite the opposite. That's how she had the guts to hang herself before the execution. It's just as she taught us in her propaganda films — either live by what you believe or die with pride and dignity.

Q) Do you think that society and China's cultural climate conspired against Jiang Ching and forced her to become who she was?

A) Certainly. As an author I believe that it is important to show that nobody is born evil. After the Communists won the civil war, Mao became China's modern emperor; he was a playboy who got every beauty he set his eyes on. He had an obsession with actresses, especially opera and film actresses. And he believed in sleeping with virgins to keep himself vital. Imagine Madame Mao as a woman, a wife, and how she felt. Though I don't accept her, I can almost understand why she chose evil.

For nearly 30 years she suffered and plotted. She waited for the day when she could manipulate herself into power and, more important, back into Mao's heart. The Cultural Revolution was her chance. China was ready for her. She was in ecstasy — playing a leading lady on a live stage and in love with Mao once again. It's a perfect opera from beginning to end.

Timeline of Modern Chinese History

1893

Mao Tse-tung is born.

1911

The Ch'ing Dynasty, which has held power since 1644, ends; the period of instability that follows, characterized by feuding warlords, lasts until 1927.

August 1912

The National People's Party, or Kuomintang, is founded.

1913

Jiang Ching, the future Madame Mao, is born.

1914

World War I begins; Japan seizes German holdings in Shantung Province.

1915

The Peking government recognizes Japan's authority over the Shantung territory, southern Manchuria, and eastern Inner Mongolia; Germany and Britain also lay claim to Chinese territory.

1917

China declares war on Germany.

1918

Peking signs a secret deal with Japan accepting Japan's claim to Shantung.

May 4, 1919

In response, massive student demonstrations against the Peking government take place.

July 1, 1921

The Chinese Communist Party founded, with Mao as one of its key members.

1925

Chiang Kai-shek becomes leader of the National People's Party.

1927

The Communist Party seizes control of the southeastern province of Kiangsi; Nationalist forces surround the province and institute a blockade; an estimated one million people die of starvation and disease.

October 1934

The Long March of 86,000 Communists from Kiangsi propels Mao Tse-tung to power.

July 1937

Japan invades China; Mao Tse-tung uses World War II and nationalistic fervor to further communism in China.

1938

Jiang Ching marries Mao Tse-tung.

August 1945

World War II ends.

October 1, 1949

China's Independence Day. The People's Republic of China is established, and Mao Tse-tung is elected chairman.

February 1950

China signs the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union.

1953

China initiates its first Five-Year Plan, the Transition to Socialism.

1958–1960

The Great Leap Forward is marked by propaganda championing human willpower as the means to industrialization and economic growth.

1966–1976

The Cultural Revolution, led by Mao and the Red Guard, causes great suffering and unrest; the Gang of Four comprising Jiang Ching, Mao's wife; Chang Ch'un-ch'iao, a Shanghai Propaganda Department official; Yao Wen-yüan, a literary critic; and Wang Hung-wen, a Shanghai security guard — rises to power.

1971

Lin Piao, the leader of the People's Liberation Army and Mao's official successor, plots Mao's assassination, is exposed, and dies.

1976

Mao Tse-tung dies; Hua Kuo-feng succeeds him; Cho En-lai, premier of the People's Republic, dies.

1978

Teng Hsiao-p'ing, as head of the People's Republic, begins economic modernization.

1980

The members of the Gang of Four are tried in court and sentenced to prison.

1991

Jiang Ching dies.