

## A Reader's Guide



# Empress Orchid

by Anchee Min

- [About \*Empress Orchid\*](#)
- [About Anchee Min](#)
- [Questions for Discussion](#)
- [A Conversation with Anchee Min](#)
- [For Further Reading](#)

### **About *Empress Orchid***

---

A San Francisco Chronicle Best Book of the Year

"A fascinating novel, similar to Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* . . . A revisionist portrait of a beautiful and strong-willed woman." — *Houston Chronicle*

"Superb . . . [an] unforgettable heroine." — *People*

"A sexually charged, eye-opening portrayal of the Chinese empire . . . with heart-wrenching scenes of desperate failure and a sensuality that rises off its heated pages." — *Elle*

From a master of the historical novel, *Empress Orchid* sweeps readers into the heart of the Forbidden City to tell the fascinating story of a young concubine who becomes China's last empress. Min introduces the beautiful Tzu Hsi, known as Orchid, and weaves an epic of a country girl who seized power through seduction, murder, and endless intrigue. When China is threatened by enemies, she alone seems capable of holding the country together.

In this "absorbing companion piece to her novel *Becoming Madame Mao*" (*New York Times*), readers and reading groups will once again be transported by Min's lavish evocation of the Forbidden City in its last days of imperial glory and by her brilliant portrait of a flawed yet utterly compelling woman who survived, and ultimately dominated, a male world.

### **About Anchee Min**

---

**Anchee Min** was born in Shanghai in 1957. At seventeen she was sent to a labor collective, where a talent scout for Madame Mao's Shanghai Film Studio recruited her to work as a

propaganda-movie actress. She came to the United States in 1984. Her 1994 memoir, *Red Azalea*, was named a New York Times Notable Book and was an international bestseller. Min is also the author of *Wild Ginger* and the national bestseller *Becoming Madame Mao*.

## Questions for Discussion

---

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Empress Orchid* for every reader.

1. Orchid's character is based on Tzu Hsi, China's longest-reigning female ruler and its last empress. In what ways does Min develop a convincing voice in Orchid? How does Min make the Forbidden City come to life?
2. Early in the novel, Orchid hears a beggar singing: "To give it up is to accept your fate. / To give it up is to create peace. / To give it up is to gain the upper hand, and / To give it up is to have it all" (16). How does this song set the tone for the rest of the book?
3. Success in the Forbidden City rests heavily on loyalty. How does Orchid ensure that those around her are loyal? Can anyone truly be trusted within the walls of the city? How does this affect the society as a whole?
4. Eunuchs play a vital role in the Forbidden City, and An-te-hai quickly becomes a guide for Orchid. Why do you think An-te-hai is so eager to devote himself to her?
5. Orchid is willing to go to any lengths to gain the Emperor's attention. What drives her determination to succeed? Do boundaries exist for how far the characters will go to secure attention, power, and affection? Why does Orchid risk her life to visit Big Sister Faun? Does she have anything to lose?
6. Orchid comments that Emperor Hsien Feng "was his own captive" (119). Does Orchid escape a similar fate?
7. What enables Orchid to be such a powerful ruler in a society dominated by men? How does she gain respect and remain strong amid the opposition she faces?
8. Orchid comments: "The Emperor once told me that the Forbidden City was nothing more than a burning straw hut in a vast wilderness" (151). What does the Emperor mean by this? How is this statement illustrated throughout the novel?
9. Min paints a picture of foreigners imposing their views on another culture. What light does she shed on Western interference with the Chinese imperial family structure? How does this relate to more recent times?
10. The Forbidden City is a highly ordered place, tradition-bound and ruled by strict etiquette. How would you handle such restrictions? In what ways do you relate to Orchid? What confines exist in your own life and society in general?
11. Nuharoo tells Orchid: "To truly have something is to not have it at all" (312). Do you agree with this statement? How does it apply to Orchid? To the other characters in the book?

12. Min's purpose is to show Empress Orchid's heroic effort to revive China. Although Orchid failed, she's courageous in Min's eyes. In what ways is Orchid a heroine?

## 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 descriptions. 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 gain access to documents in 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 (or copies of decrees, I can't be sure). I was choking on the fumes, but I was glad I stayed. The evidence was 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. From then on, she was forbidden to have 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 them 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.

## For Further Reading

---

[Becoming Madame Mao](#) by [Anchee Min](#)

[Wild Ginger](#) by [Anchee Min](#)