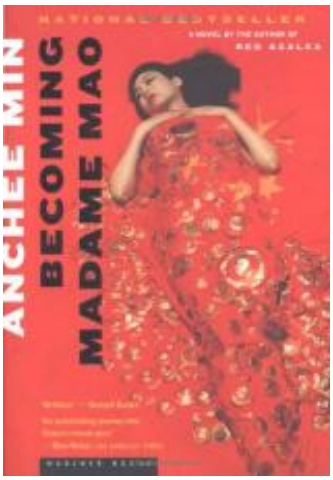
Becoming Madame Mao

by Anchee Min



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.

Discussion Guide

Timeline of Modern Chinese History

1893	Mao Tse-tung is born
1911	Chi'ing dynasty, in power since 1644, ends, followed by a period of instability marked by feuding warlords, which lasts until 1927
August 1912	National People's Party, or Guomindang, is founded
1913	Jiang Ching, the future Madame Mao, is born
1914	World War I begins; Japan seizes German holdings in Shandong Province
1915	The Beijing government recognizes Japan's authority over the Shandong territory, southern Manchuria, and eastern Inner Mongolia; Germany and Britain also lay claim to Chinese territory
1917	China declares war on Germany
1918	Beijing signs a secret deal with Japan accepting Japan's claim to Shandong
May 4, 1919	In response, massive student demonstrations against the Beijing government are held
1921	Sun Yat-sen seeks Soviet support for the newly established Chinese Communist Party
1925	Chiang Kai-shek becomes leader of the National People's Party
1927	The Communist Party splits from the Nationalist People's Party and seizes control of the southeastern province of Jianxi; Nationalist forces surround the province and institute a blockade; an estimated one million die of starvation and disease
October 1934	The Long March of 86,000 Communists from Jianxi propels Mao Tse-tung to power
1938	Jiang Ching marries Mao Tse-tung
July 1937	Japan invades China; Mao Tse-tung uses World War II and nationalistic fervor to further communism in China
August 1945	World War II ends

October 1, 1949	The People's Republic of China is established
February 1950	China signs the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union
1953?1957	China's first Five-Year Plan, the Transition to Socialism, takes place
1954	Mao Tse-tung is elected chairman of the People's Republic of China
1958?1960	The Great Leap Forward, marked by propaganda championing human willpower as the means to industrialization and economic growth, takes place
1966?1976	The Cultural Revolution, led by Mao Tse-tung and the Red Guard, takes place; the Gang of Four, including Jiang Ching, Mao's wife; Zhang Chun-qiao, a Shanghai Propaganda Department official; Yao Wen-yuan, a literary critic; and Wang Hong-wen, a Shanghai security guard, rises to power
1971	Lin Biao, leader of the People's Liberation Army, dies
1974	Peng De-huai, critic of Mao during the Great Leap Forward, dies
1976	Mao Tse-tung dies; Hua Guo-feng succeeds him; Zhou En-lai, premier of the Republic, dies
1978	Deng Xiao-ping, as head of the Republic, begins economic modernization
1980	The members of the Gang of Four are tried in court and sentenced to prison
1991	Jiang Ching dies

Author Bio

Anchee Min was born in Shanghai in 1957. At 17 she was sent to a labor collective, where a talent scout for Madame Mao's Shanghai Film Studio recruited her to work as a movie actress. She moved to the United States in 1984. Her first memoir, RED AZALEA, was an international bestseller, published in 20 countries. She has since published six novels, including the Richard & Judy choice EMPRESS ORCHID and, most recently, PEARL OF CHINA.

Critical Praise

"Nothing less than brillant."

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Publication Date: April 15, 2001

Genres: Biography, Nonfiction

Paperback: 330 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books

ISBN-10: 0618127003

ISBN-13: 9780618127009