

# **Becoming Madame Mao**

Anchee Min

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*To Lloyd with all my love*

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You are what your deep, driving desire is.  
As your desire is, so is your will.  
As your will is, so is your deed.  
As your deed is, so is your destiny.

—*Brihadaranyaka Upanishads* iv.4.5

## **Madame Mao**

as Yunhe (1919–1933)  
as Lan Ping (1934–1937)  
and as Jiang Ching (1938–1991)

*Author's Note:* I have tried my best to mirror the facts of history. Every character in this book existed in real life. The letters, poems, and extended quotations have been translated from original documents.

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## Prologue

*What does history recognize? A dish made of a hundred sparrows—a plate of mouths.*

*Fourteen years since her arrest. 1991. Madame Mao Jiang Ching is seventy-seven years old. She is on the death seat. The only reason the authorities keep postponing the execution is their hope of her repentance.*

*Well, I won't surrender. When I was a child my mother used to tell me that I should think of myself as grass—born to be stepped on. But I think of myself as a peacock among hens. I am not being judged fairly. Side by side Mao Tse-tung and I stood, yet he is considered a god while I am a demon. Mao Tse-tung and I were married for thirty-eight years. The number is thirty-eight.*

*I speak to my daughter Nah. I ask her to be my biographer. She is allowed to visit me once a month. She wears a peasant woman's hairstyle—a wok-lid-cut around the ears—and she is in a man's suit. She looks unbearably silly. She does that to hurt my eyes. She was divorced and remarried and now lives in Beijing. She has a son to whom my identity has been a secret.*

*No, Mother. The tone is firm and stubborn.*

*I can't describe my disappointment. I have expectations of Nah. Too many perhaps. Maybe that's what killed her spirit. Am I different from my mother who wanted the best for me by binding my feet? Nah picks what I dislike and drops what I like. It's been that way since she saw how her father treated me. How can one not wet one's shoes when walking along the seashore all the time? Nah doesn't see the whole picture. She doesn't know how her father once worshiped me. She can't imagine that I was Mao's sunshine. I don't blame her. There was no trace of that passion left on Mao's face after he entered the Forbidden City and became a modern emperor. No trace that Mao and I were once lovers unto death.*

*The mother tells the daughter that both her father and she hate cowards. The words have no effect. Nah is too beaten. The mother thinks of her as a rotten piece of wood that can never be made into a beautiful piece of furniture. She is so afraid that her voice trembles when she speaks. The mother can't recognize any part of herself in the daughter.*

*The mother repeats the ancient story of Cima-Qinhua, the brave girl who saved her mother from a bloody riot. The model of piety. Nah listens but makes no response.*

*Then she cries and says that she is not the mother. Can't do the things she does. And should not be requested to perform an impossible task.*

*Can't you lift a finger? the mother yells. It's my last wish, for heaven's sake!*

*Save me, Nah. Any day a bullet will be put into my head. Can you picture it? Don't you see that there has been a conspiracy against me? Do you remember the morning when Deng Xiao-ping came to your father's funeral and what he did? He just brushed fingers with me—didn't even bother to shake my hand. It was as if he questioned that I was Mao's widow. He was aware of the cameras—he purposely let the journalists catch the scene. And the other one, Marshal Ye Jian-ying. He walked past me wearing an expression as if I had murdered the Chairman myself!*

*Your father warned me about his comrades. But he didn't do anything to protect me. He could be heartless. His face had a vindictive glow when he made that prediction. He was jealous that I got to go on living. He would have liked to see me buried with him, like the old emperors did with their concubines. One should never have delusions about your father. It took me thirty-eight years to figure out that sly fox. He could never keep his hands away from deception. He couldn't survive a day without trickery. I had seen ghosts in his eyes stretching out their claws. A living god. The omniscient Mao. Full-of-mice-shit.*

*You are a historian, Nah. You should document my role in the revolution. I want you to demonstrate my sacrifices and contributions. Yes, you can do it. Forget about what your father will think about you. He is dead. I wonder what's happened to his ghost. I wonder if it rests in its grave. Watch out for his shadow.*

*The hands to strangle me are creeping up fast. I can feel them at my throat. That's why I am telling you this. I am not afraid of death if I know my spirit will live through the tip of your fountain pen to the lips of the people, generations to come. Tell the world the story of a heroine. If you can't print your manuscript in China, take it outside. Don't let me down. Please.*

*You are not a heroine, Mother! I hear my daughter fire back. You are a miserable, mad and sick woman. You can't stop spreading your disease, hike Father said, you have dug so many graves that you don't have enough bodies to lay in them!*

*Their dinner has turned cold. Nah stands up and kicks away her chair. Her elbow accidentally hits the table. A dish falls. Breaks. Pieces of ceramics scatter on the floor. Grease splatters on the mother's shoe. You have killed me, Nah. Madame Mao suddenly feels short of breath. Her hand grips the edge of the table to prevent herself*

*from falling.*

*Pretend that you never had me, Mother.*

*You can't disown your mother!*

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*Well, all my hope is gone. I am exhausted and ready to exit the stage for good. The last curtain time will be tomorrow morning at five-thirty when the guards change shift. They are usually dull at that time. The old guard will be yawning his way out while the new guard yawns his way in.*

*It's dark outside. A beautiful black night without stars. The prison officials have put me on a suicide watch. But they cannot beat my will. I have saved enough handkerchiefs and socks to make a rope.*

*The rubber walls emit a terrible smell. But all is fine with me now. Tomorrow you will read about me in the news: Madame Mao Jiang Ching committed suicide by hanging. The day to mark is May 14, 1991. Am I sad? Not really. I have lived an extraordinary life. The great moments ... Now as I think about them for the last time, they still make my heart hammer with excitement ...*

# 1

SHE LEARNS PAIN EARLY. When she is four, her mother comes to bind her feet. The mother tells the child that she cannot afford to wait any longer. She promises that afterwards, after the pain, the girl will be beautiful. She will get to marry into a rich family where she doesn't have to walk but will be carried around in a sedan chair. The three-inch lotus feet are a symbol of prestige and class.

The girl is curious. She sits on a stool barefoot. She plays with the pile of cloth with her toes, picks up a strip, then drops it. Mother is stirring a jar of sticky rice porridge. The girl learns that the porridge will be used as glue. Good glue, strong, won't tear, Mother says. It seals out the air. The ancient mummies were preserved in the same way. The mother is in her late twenties. She is a pretty woman, long slanting almond-shaped eyes, which the girl inherited. The mother hardly smiles. She describes herself as a radish pickled in the sauce of misery. The girl is used to her mother's sadness, to her silence during family meals. And she is used to her own position—the last concubine's daughter, the most distant relative the family considers. Her father was sixty years old when she was born. He has been a stranger to her.

The mother's hair is lacquer black, wrapped in a bun and fixed with a bamboo pin. She asks the girl to sit still as she begins. She looks solemn as if she is in front of an altar. She takes the girl's right foot, washes it and wipes it dry with her blouse. She doesn't tell the girl that this is the last time she will see her feet as she knows them. The mother doesn't tell her that by the time her feet are released they will look like triangle-shaped rice cakes with toenails curled under the sole. The mother tries to concentrate on the girl's future. A future that will be better than her own.

The mother begins wrapping. The girl watches with interest. The mother applies the paste in between each layer of cloth. It is a summer noon. Outside the window are climbing little bell flowers, small and red like dripping blood. The girl sees herself, her feet being bound, in her mother's dressing mirror. Also in the frame, a delicately carved ancient vase on the table with a bunch of fresh jasmine in it. The scent is strong. The pendulum of an old clock on the wall swings with a rustic sound. The house is quiet. The other concubines are napping and the servants are sitting in the kitchen quietly peeling beans.

Sweat gathers on her mother's forehead and begins to drip like broken beads down her cheeks. The girl asks if her mother should take a break. The woman shakes her head and says that she is finishing the task. The girl looks at her feet. They are as thick as elephant legs. The girl finds it amusing. She moves her toes inside the cocoon. Is that it? she asks. When her mother moves away the jar, the girl jumps on the floor and plays.

Stay in bed from now on, her mother says, the pain will take a while.

The girl has no trouble until the third week. She is already tired with her elephant legs and now comes the pain. Her toes scream for space. Her mother is near her. She is there to prevent the girl from tearing off the strips. She guards the elephant legs as if guarding the girl's future. She keeps explaining to the crying girl why she has to endure the pain. Then it becomes too much. The girl's feet are infected. The mother's tears pour. No, no, no, don't touch them. She insists, cries, curses. Herself. Men. She asks why she didn't have a son. Again and again she tells the girl that females are like grass, born to be stepped on.

The year is 1919. Shan-dong Province, China. The town is the birthplace of Confucius. It is called Zhu. The ancient walls and gates stand high. From the girl's window the hills are like giant turtles crawling along the edge of the earth. The Yellow River runs through the town and its murky waters make their way lazily to the sea. The coast cities and provinces have been occupied by foreign forces—first the Germans and now the Japanese—since China lost the Opium War in 1858. China is collapsing and no one pays attention to the girl's cries.

The girl is never able to forget the pain, even when she becomes Madame Mao, the most powerful woman in China during the late 1960s and '70s. She recalls the pain as "evidence of the crimes of feudalism" and she expresses her outrage in a series of operas and ballets, *The Women of the Red Detachment* and *The White-Haired Girl*, among many others. She makes the billion population share her pain.

To understand the pain is to understand what the proletariat went through during the old society, she cries at a public rally. It is to understand the necessity of Communism! She believes the pain she suffered gives her the right to lead the nation. It's the kind of pain that shoots through your core, she tells the actress who plays the lead in her opera. You can't land on your toes and you can't fly either. You are trapped, chained down. There is an invisible saw. You are toeless. Your breath dies out. The whole house hears you but there is no rescue.

She remembers her fight with the pain vividly. A heroine of the real-life stage. Ripping the foot-binding cloths is her debut.

If there is no rebellion, there is no survival! she shouts at rallies during the Cultural Revolution.

My mother is shocked the moment I throw the smelly binding strips in front of her and show her my feet. They are blue and yellow, swelling and dripping with pus. A couple of flies land on the strips. The pile looks like a dead hundred-footed-octopus monster. I say to my mother, If you try to put my feet back in the wrap I shall kill myself. I mean it. I have already found a place for myself to lie. It will be in Confucius's temple. I like the couplet on its gate:

*The temple has no monk  
So the floor will be swept by the wind  
The temple has no candles  
So the light will be lit by the moon*

You need to have the lotus feet, my mother cries. You are not made to labor.

Afterwards my mother quits. I wonder if she already knows that she will need me to run with her one day.

The girl's memory of her father is that he lives on liquor and is violent. Both her mother and she fear him. He hits them. There is no way to predict when his temper will rise. Each time it shocks the soul out of the girl.

He is not a poor man. Madame Mao doesn't tell the truth later when she wants to impress her fellow countrymen. She describes him as a proletarian. In fact he is a well-to-do businessman, the town carpenter and owner of a wood shop. He has four full-time workers. Two of them are blind. He uses them to sand wood. The family has food on the table and the girl goes to school.

I never understand why my father beats my mother. There never really is a reason. Nobody in the house interferes. All the wives hear the beating. All my stepbrothers and -sisters witness the act. Yet no one utters a word. If my father is not pleased with my mother, he comes to her room, takes off his shoe and starts hitting her. Concubines are bought slaves and bedmaids, but I wonder if my father's true anger is because my mother didn't produce a son for him.

This is how her father plants the seed of worthlessness in her. It is something she lives

with. The moment she begins remembering how she was brought up, she experiences a rage that bursts at its own time and pace. Like the flood of the Yellow River, it comes and crashes in big waves. Its violence changes the landscape of her being. The rage gets worse as she ages. It becomes a kept beast. It breathes and grows underground while consuming her. Its constant presence makes her feel worthless. Her desire to fight it, to prove that it does not exist, lies behind her every action.

It is my nature to rebel against oppressors. When my mother tells me to learn to "eat a meatball made of your own tongue," and "hide your broken arm inside your sleeve," I fight without ever considering the consequences.

In frustration Mother hits me. She hits me with a broom. She is scared of my nature. She thinks that I will be killed like the young revolutionaries whose heads are hung on flagpoles on top of the town gate. They were slaughtered by the authorities.

Mother scolds me, calls me a *mu-yu*—a monk's chanting tool—made to be hit all the time. But I can't be set right. It is always afterwards, after she has exhausted herself from hitting me, that she breaks down and sobs. She calls herself an unfit mother and is sure that she will end up being punished in her next life. She will be made into a most unfortunate animal, a cow who when alive bears heavy burdens and when dies is eaten, its skin made into jackets and its horns into medicine.

Every time I see Mother's tear-stained face I age. I feel white hair sprouting out of my head. I am sick of seeing Mother tortured. I often wish that she were dead so she would be released from having to take care of me.

But the mother goes on living, for her, the daughter she wishes were a son. This is how misery permeates the girl's soul. Most of her life she can't be satisfied with who she is. The irony is that she truly wishes to satisfy her mother's wish. This is how she begins her acting career. Very young. In her own house. She slips into roles. When she thinks that she is not who she is, she becomes relaxed and fear free. She is in a safe place where her father's terror can no longer reach and her mother's tears can no longer wash her away.

Later on it becomes clear that Madame Mao doesn't forgive. She believes that one must collect the debts owed to one. She has little desire to understand forgiveness. Revenge, on the other hand, she understands. She understands it in the most savage way. In her life, she never hesitates to order her enemies' complete elimination. She

does it naturally. It is a practice she started as a young girl.

I see my father hit Mother with a shovel. It happened suddenly. Without warning. I can hardly believe my eyes. He is mad. He calls Mother a slut. Mother's body curls up. My chest swells. He hits her back, front, shouting that he will break her bones. Mother is in shock, unable to move. Father drags her, kicks and steps on her as if to flatten her into a piece of paper.

I feel horror turning my stomach upside down. I jump. I get in between them. You are no longer my father, I announce, my body trembling all over. I will never forgive you! One of these days you will find yourself dead because I put mice poison in your liquor!

The man turns and raises the shovel over his head.

My lips burn. My front tooth is in my mouth.

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During the production of her operas and ballets in the 1970s, Madame Mao describes the wound to the actresses, actors, artists and the nation. Madame Mao says, Our heroines must be covered with wounds. Blood-dripping wounds. Wounds that have been torn, punctured or broken by weapons like shovels, whips, glass, wooden sticks, bullets or explosions. Study the wounds, pay attention to the degree of the burn, the layers of the infected tissue. The color transitions in the flesh. And the shapes that remind you of a worm-infested body.

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Eight years old and she is already determined. It is not clear whether her father kicked her mother out of his house or her mother ran away herself. At any rate the girl no longer has a home. The mother takes the daughter with her. They walk from street to street and town to town. The mother works as a maid. A washmaid, lower in rank than a kitchenmaid. The mother works where she and the girl will be given a corner to sleep at night. At night the mother often leaves mysteriously. When she returns it is usually dawn. The mother never tells the girl where she goes. One day when the girl insists, she says that she visits different houses. She either peels potatoes or serves as a foot warmer for the master's children. She never tells the girl that she is a foot warmer for the master himself. The mother withers quickly. Her skin wrinkles up like ripples in a lake and her hair dries like a winter stalk.

Some nights the girl gets bored waiting for her mother. She can't sleep yet she is afraid to go out. She lies in bed quietly. After midnight she hears bullets being fired. She counts the shots so she will know how many people have been killed.

My number always matches the number of heads that hang on the gate of the town the next day. My schoolmates talk to each other like this: I'll slaughter you and hang your head on a hook and then I'll stick an opium pipe between your teeth.

I hate school. I am an object of attack because I have no father and have a mother who works at jobs that arouse suspicion. I beg my mother to transfer me to a different school. But the situation doesn't change. It gets so bad that one day a classmate unleashes a dog.

Madame Mao later uses the incident in both a ballet and opera of the same title, *The Women of the Red Detachment*. The villains come with vicious-looking dogs to chase the slave girl. A close-up of the dog teeth and a closeup of the wound. The bleeding body parts.

My mother's face becomes unrecognizable. Her pretty cheekbones start to protrude and her eyes have deep pockets. She is so sick that she can't walk far. Yet we are still on the run. She has been fired from her job. She can't talk, she whispers in between breaths. She writes a letter and begs her parents for shelter and food. I wonder why she hasn't done that earlier. She won't explain. I sense that she wasn't her parents' favorite. There are probably bad memories of the past. But now she has no choice.

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My grandparents live in Jinan. It is the capital of Shan-dong Province. Compared to the town of Zhu, it is a fancy city. It is on the south side of the Yellow River, about nine miles away. The city is a center of business and politics. It is very old. The names of the streets reflect its past glory: Court Street, Financial Street, Military Street. There are magnificent temples and dazzling opera houses. I don't know until later that many of the opera houses are in fact whorehouses.

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My grandparents and I have never met and our meeting changes my life. My dependence on my mother begins to shift dramatically as my grandfather takes charge in caring for me. He is a kind fellow, a meek man actually, knowledgeable but powerless in handling reality. He teaches me opera. He asks me to recite after him. Phrase by phrase and tone by tone we get through the most famous arias. I don't like it, but I want to please him.

Every morning, sitting on a rattan chair with a cup of tea, my grandfather begins. He tells me what the story is about first, the situation and the character, and then out his voice comes. He is a terrible singer, which makes him quite funny. I follow him, not remembering exactly what I am singing. I purposely imitate his poor tone. He tries to correct me. After a few efforts, he discovers that I have been naughty and threatens to be upset and then I behave. I hit the notes in a perfect voice. He claps and laughs. With his mouth wide open I see a hollow with all the teeth gone.

We move on. Soon I am able to do passages from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, especially *The Empty City*. My grandfather is pleased. He lets me know that I count. A boy or a girl, to him it makes no difference. There is only one condition: as long as I follow him and learn. He lets me do whatever I want around the house. My grandmother is a quiet little lady and a Buddhist. She echoes her husband and never seems to have an opinion of her own. She always covers up for me. For example, when I accidentally break Grandfather's favorite ink bottle, she uses her own savings and hurries to the town on her lotus feet and buys a new bottle to replace the broken one. She does it quietly and I adore her.

My grandfather continues his cultivation. His head swings in circles. I do the same. When he is in a good mood, he takes me to operas. Not the good ones—he can't afford the tickets—but the imitations presented in the whorehouses. During the performances fights often break out among the drunkards.

It is my grandfather's wish that I complete elementary school. You are a peacock living among hens, he says. He is fixing the arm of his rattan chair when he says this to me. His head is on the floor and his rear end points toward the ceiling. The phrase has an enormous effect on me.

My grandfather enrolls me in a local school a block away. He gives me a formal name, Yunhe—Crane in the Clouds. The image is picked from his favorite opera, *The Golden Pavilion*. The crane is the symbol of hope.

The new school is a terrible place. The rich kids beat the poor whenever they like. Yunhe endures as much as she can until one day she is hit by a boy and a group of girls applaud. It enrages her. For days afterwards she is chewed by an incredible pain. I would have endured as usual if it were just the boys taking advantage of the girls, Madame Mao says later. I wouldn't have felt so alone and betrayed. I wouldn't have taken it so personally because mistreating women was considered a tradition. But it was the girls, the women, the grass, the worthless creatures themselves, laughing at their own kind that hurt, that opened and dipped my wounds in salt water.

## 2

SLOWLY MY MOTHER FADES from my life. It is said that she is married. To whom? She never introduces us to the new husband. She just disappears. Gone. The door is shut. I don't hear from her. She is done with parenting. I don't know what to do, only that I don't want to end up like her.

I watch operas and copy the arias. *The Legend of Huoxiao Yu* and *Story of the West Chamber*. I dream about the characters in the ancient tales, the rebellious heroines, women who fight fiercely for their happiness and get it. I decide that I shall be an opera actress so I will get to live a heroine's life on stage. But my grandfather opposes the idea. To him, actresses and prostitutes are the same. I don't give in. My grandfather regrets that he ever introduced me to opera. He threatens to disown me. But it is too late.

The girl is not sold to the opera troupe as she later claims. She runs away from home and delivers herself to a local troupe. She begs to be accepted. She is pretty, already a full-size young woman, already attractive. She claims to be an orphan. She runs away before her grandparents get a chance to disown her. This becomes a pattern in her life. With her husbands and lovers, she takes the initiative. She abandons before being abandoned.

The girl becomes an apprentice. While learning her craft she washes the floors, cleans makeup drawers, fills water jars and takes care of the leading actress's wardrobe. She gets to sit by the curtain during performances. Like a spring field in the season's first rain, she absorbs. During the New Year's Eve performance she gets to play her first one-line role. The line is: *Tea, Madame*.

For the role she dresses up in full costume. Her hair is up, pinned with pearls and glittering ornaments. In the mirror, in the painted face, in the red lips, the girl sees herself in the world she has been imagining.

Yet the place shows its ugly face. At night, after the performances, the girl hears sobbing. After her mistress takes off the makeup and costume, the girl sees a withered face. A young woman of twenty but who looks forty. A face of wood, carved heavily with wrinkles. There must be a ghost's hand working on this face, the girl thinks to herself.

When the girl goes out to fetch duck-blood soup on her mistress's order, she sees men waiting. Each night, a different man. They are the troupe owner's friends. Most of them are old, and a couple of them have a mouthful of gold teeth. The mistress is told to entertain them, to help them realize their fantasies. It doesn't matter that she is