

Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* and the Self-Constructed Heroine

Emily Lau Kui Ling¹
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Article Received: 30 November 2015; Article Accepted: 20 October 2016

Abstract

Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), is a remarkable piece of historical fiction. Min's choice of inter-textuality between history and fiction is apt as this quasi-poetic form allows for the possibility of delving into the psychological depths of the protagonist which fills the gaps in the existing historians' biographies of Madame Mao. The marrying of history and fiction provides Min the subjectivity to penetrate deep into the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, thus humanising even an outcast. This paper, through a feminist perspective, shows how Min renders a powerful tale of passion, betrayal and survival through the life story of Madame Mao. Min, through her writing, harnesses the power of language and the power of imagination as an instrumental and effective strategy to tap into the process of Madame Mao's self-construction: from poverty and obscurity to professional success and fame.

Keywords

Anchee Min, Madame Mao, Chinese women, femme fatale, historical fiction, self-construction

Introduction

The revolutionary impulse of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in Socialist China places premium on a collectivist culture, with its ideological tenets locked in a confrontation against the autonomy of self. This political maelstrom led to ascetic self-denial during the "ten bad years" (Litzinger 424). By and large, the autobiographical bent in Chinese women's writings galvanises post-Mao literature and reflects the radical use of personal experiences to effect a reconstitution of the self. These writings play a vanguard role in modern Chinese literature as they give prominence to female consciousness to interrogate and validate the female self which has suffered immensely from the collective identity imposed by the State. They are a political strategy to deconstruct and renegotiate the structural relation between the personal and the public, as well as its underlying gender system.

¹ Emily Lau Kui Ling teaches in the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Her teaching of language in literary texts for the past two years has led her to work in the area of Literature and Stylistics. Email: elkl@um.edu.my.

Anchee Min (1957-), born and bred in Shanghai, left her motherland in 1984 for the United States. Currently a representative of the Asian-American voice, she attempts to channel her creative talents into writing. Her writings take on a diasporic feminist stance by exposing the grim realities of Socialist China, criticising state patriarchy and elevating heroic Chinese women against the stereotypes. A rhetoric of liberal humanism, individualism and progressivism punctuates Min's works as she stresses the thematic concerns of an atrophied self and the need for self-construction. Min interweaves these predominant feminist concerns into her memoir, *Red Azalea* (1994), and the fictional works *Katherine* (1995), *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), *Wild Ginger* (2002) and *Empress Orchid* (2004). This paper examines the process of "becoming" for the protagonist, Jiang Ching, in *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000) as she re-constructs and re-defines her *self* in the years following Mao's era. Madame Mao's empowerment is important as it highlights the post-Mao writers' attempt to regain a sense of their selfhood. Madame Mao is historically guilty of her participation in the Great Proletarian Chinese Revolution (GPCR). However, Madame Mao is not only a victimiser; essentially, she is a victim herself. Compared to their male counterparts, Chinese women endured and suffered much more deeply. They were doubly marginalised: first, by the patriarchal structure and secondly, by the State. Min, in empowering Madame Mao, rose to the challenge of an emancipatory discourse to re-appropriate the historical category of women from the State discourse for the purpose of empowering the female gender.

The Process of "Becoming"

Anchee Min's third novel, *Becoming Madame Mao* is a remarkable piece of historical fiction. More than a decade on, her portrayal of Madame Mao still comments powerfully on the ongoing discourse of the conception of woman in contemporary Chinese society. Min's choice of inter-textuality between history and fiction is apt and the quasi-poetic form allows for the possibility of delving into the protagonist's psychological depths. The choice of the word "becoming" in the title of the book, *Becoming Madame Mao*, that precedes the designation "Madame Mao" is significant. Undergirding this word is the powerful idea of the evolving self-construction of the heroine.

Min creates a fascinating portrait of one of the most controversial and powerful women of the twentieth century, humanising the hated "White-Boned Demon" of Beijing's official press (Terrill 15). While Mao remains a godlike figure to the people of China, Madame Mao has been subjected to deliberate historical erasure. "But in truth," Min argues, "she was an early feminist who was caught

up in the whirlpool of Mao's political and personal life."² Min thus resurrects her in a sweeping, erotically-charged narrative that moves powerfully from the intimately personal to the great stage of world history. *Becoming Madame Mao* is a compelling tale of fearless passion, betrayal and survival that has created a finely nuanced portrait of a woman who railed against the confines of her tradition and whose deep-seated insecurities propelled her to reinvent herself constantly. Her stage career was the main agency for her reinvention of self. Her life, often iconoclastic and audacious, courted controversy because it challenged orthodoxy and irritated further the problematic issues of gender and patriarchal relations such as Confucian family and marriage institutions, women's identity and autonomy.

Essentially, the word "becoming" denotes and connotes a process of evolution: in this context, from starting life as an obscure concubine's daughter, the protagonist emerges as the empowered First Lady of China. Madame Mao's process of "becoming" a heroine is, first and foremost, reflected in her preoccupation with the changing of her name. In Min's *Becoming Madame Mao*, there is no mention of the protagonist's name for the first eight years of her life. Only when her mother and she escape from her abusive father and settle with her maternal grandparents in Jinan, does her grandfather give her a formal name "Yunhe," which means "Crane in the Clouds." The word "crane" is symbolic of hope to the Chinese (*Becoming Madame Mao* 14). It is a fitting name to describe Madame Mao's determination and indomitability.

However, it is interesting to note that for the Chinese, one's given name is not permanent. It is a common custom for a Chinese to alter his/her name when he/she reaches certain phases in life. Each change serves as an indication that one's course in life has significantly altered or developed. As an adult, Madame Mao has her name changed twice, the first being her own choice:

I decide to change my name. A new name symbolizes new life. I want the name to ring my character too.... I name myself Lan Ping. *Lan* means Blue, my favorite color, and *Ping* means Apple and sweetness. Blue associates with the images of sky, ink and myth, while Apple evokes the idea of harvest, ripeness, fruitful future and also my hometown Shan-dong, where apples are the trademark export product. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 48-9; italics in the original)

This is done shortly after her release from prison and her separation from her husband, Yu Qiwei. She desires her new name to "ring [her] character." Both words, *Lan* [Blue] and *Ping* [Apple] suggest a new beginning, a brighter and more

² Taken from an unpublished interview, found on the internet site: <http://carolinanavy.com/navy/creativewriting/sking/ancheemin/quest.html>. The interview was accessed on 31 April 2004, but has since become unavailable.

promising future ahead. She is determined to project a new identity in order to be noticed. On the next occasion, it is Mao who changes her name to Jiang Ching.³ As she recalls:

I am no longer Lan Ping – Blue Apple. The new characters have straight lines like a boat sailing in full wind – *Jiang* as River and *Ching* as Green. Jiang Ching summarizes a traditional saying: *Green comes out of blue but is richer than blue*. I have parted from my old role. I come out of blue and enter the richer color green. I am a butterfly out of the cocoon, spring belongs to me. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 158; italics in the original)

The changes in her name indicate outwardly the inward changes in her perspective and goals in life. With each alteration, she discards the old female self and emerges, phoenix-like, as another new(-er) person. Each change involves a gathering transformation of her self; each change renews her in strength and power, just as the Chinese traditional axiom suggests: “green comes out of blue but is richer than blue.” By analogy, name-changing depicts her metamorphosis from a caterpillar to a butterfly. The process delineates her transformation precisely: as a caterpillar, she struggled and her movement was restrained and limited; gradually, she was transformed into a butterfly, fully empowered to fly. Madame Mao’s two name changes reflect her concern for new evolving identities. This underscores her constant effort at self-construction; essentially a process of “becoming” a nascent self. For Madame Mao, her means to creating this self is achieved through her role as a *femme fatale* and her career as an actress.

Slaying the “Dragons” Within

Crucial to such a process of change is overcoming her fetters, the ingrained practices and postures of misogynic Chinese culture and tradition. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, in *The Female Hero* (1981), identify such fetters as “dragons,” by which they mean the “patriarchal myths and institutions that oppress women.” This idea was derived from Doris Lessing’s novel *The Four-Gated City* (1970), where the tyranny of patriarchal myths, described as “dragons,” is a prominent theme.⁴ Slaying the dragons within is preliminary to a transformed and an

³ Madame Mao’s third name has a few romanised versions. According to the Wade-Giles system, it is spelt “Chiang Ch’ing.” The other version “Jiang Qing” follows the Pinyin system. Min’s choice of “Jiang Ching” differs from both official systems. It is simply creative license. In this article, “Jiang Qing” points to the historical figure, whereas “Jiang Ching” is used to refer to Min’s choice. Throughout this article, the designation “Madame Mao” is applied except when it is necessary to use “Yunhe” or “Lan Ping” to best depict the different phases of her life.

⁴ Lessing explains the tyranny of patriarchal myths, described as “dragons”: “The mechanisms were always exactly the same, whether political, religious, psychological, philosophic. Dragons guarded the entrances and exits of each layer in the spectrum of belief, or opinion; and the dragons were always the same dragon, no matter what names they went under. The dragon was fear; fear of what

empowered self. Min's Madame Mao irrefutably exemplifies the fearless woman warrior battling such "dragons." She showcases the possibility of dismantling the shackles of the old society. She does not repress or fear the "qualities that society identifies with heroism – adventurousness, independence, self-actualization, courage and inquisitiveness" (Pearson and Pope 20). Instead, she prefers the heroic stance, defying her mother's insistence that "females are like grass, born to be stepped on" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 7).

Interestingly, she describes herself in masculine terms as "a peacock among hens" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 25), refusing, early in life, the marker of female beauty and desirability of her time: foot binding. She condemns the tradition as despicable and crippling, recognising it instinctively as an instrument of male control. Madame Mao's mother had tried to bind her feet when she was four. She withstood it for only three weeks before defiantly ripping off the foot-binding cloths, thus marking her "debut" as a "heroine of the real-life stage" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 7). She exults: "[m]y feet feel strong, as if they are on wings" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 17). Pearson and Pope affirm that "the recognition of female heroism is important, not only as a way of reclaiming women's heritage, but also as a corrective to the male bias implicit in traditional discussions of the hero" (5). This "recognition of female heroism" thus precipitates and facilitates the formation of a nascent self. Although the custom of foot-binding was officially banned in 1902, many Chinese still perpetuated the practice (Li 3). Happily, in the Nationalist era of the 1930s, "women's physical emancipation" was also promoted by the Communists: "traditional femininity was challenged and the new femininity based on a heroic image was eventually established" (Li 10). Both the Nationalist's and Communist's concern for women's physical freedom acted as a springboard for the "transformation of gender relations by gradually, if not completely, dislodging the gender hierarchy and dismantling gender stereotypes" (Li 19).

Madame Mao's unconventional attitude challenged the celebrated feminine virtues of "female inferiority, virginity, romantic love and maternal self-sacrifice" (Pearson and Pope 48). Pearson and Pope regard these virtues as "life-denying myths" and posit, "the logical extension of each myth is a psychological prison of increasing self-distrust and self-denial" (48). Madame Mao's self-image, on the contrary, lived up to her self-description as "a peacock among hens," defying and refuting the prescribed patriarchal myths. Only then was she able to emerge as a self-constructed heroine. In her marriage to Mao, Madame Mao played the submissive wife for decades, biding her time. The Party had strictly barred her from any career or political involvement as a condition for her marrying the Chairman. However, Mao's reputation was greatly bruised after the Great Leap

other people might think; fear of being different, fear of being isolated; fear of the herd we belong to; fear of that section of the herd we belong to..." (524).

Forward (GLP) catastrophe. His setback provided an opportunity for Madame Mao to assert her influence and power. He agreed to have her as a key ally to fight political dissent and together, they developed a set of leftist ideas as the means to remedy the class struggle. To reinforce his military power, Mao created a new army corps made up of adolescent males and females called the Red Guards:

August 1. She and Mao meet again in his study. He tells her that he has written a letter in response to an organization called the Red Guards. I am adding new divisions to your force. I am giving you wings.... I [Jiang Qing] like the title the Red Guards. It shows guts. Red, the color of the revolution, and Guards, your defender. Have you given them any inscription? I have. A red armband with my calligraphy, *Red Guards*, on it. She asks him if she can join him to inspect the Red Guards' representative. I'd like to offer my support. She is welcomed. I have it scheduled on August 18, he says. Show up with me at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square.... Mao appears on top of the Gate of Heavenly Peace. He moves slowly toward the bars at the edge of the platform. He wears the same identical army uniform and armband as the youths. The cap with a red star on the top sits on his big head. He walks in the middle with Madame Mao Jiang Ching on his right and Marshal Lin Biao on his left. They wear the same costumes as Mao. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 253-54)

This was the time, Emily Honig informs us, when Madame Mao “rose to political prominence during the Cultural Revolution, appeared in military attire... a presumably gender-neutral style that was emulated by teenage girl Red Guards who cut their hair short... donned army clothes, and marched barefoot through city streets” (255). Hence, Madame Mao rose from the disillusionment of the 1950s where she had been restricted and relegated to the role of a docile and obscure housewife. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Madame Mao was hailed as the paragon of the radical female role model: “Iron Girl/Woman.” Many of the female Red Guards were thrilled and captivated by this empowered female figure. However, she herself did not live in ascetic self-denial. The early evolution of her character involved her brazen exploitation of her sexuality, in contradiction to the ideal of sexlessness she later foisted on innumerable young female cadres. This was when throwing off the feminine became necessary to the further development of the character she envisioned for herself: Madame Mao. Ironically or not, Madame Mao relied on the very institution she flouted to secure her rise to power; we know her best, in fact, as Madame Mao, the Chairman’s wife. Her earlier sexual proclivity and four marriages were no secret to her critics. In her youth, Madame Mao, in spite of harsh objections from her family and the wider society, chose to embrace the erotic power of the *femme fatale*.

Femme Fatale: The Erotic as Power

The phrase *femme fatale* is often seen as a stereotypical notion of feminine evil. By and large, the classic figure of the *femme fatale* is portrayed as the enigmatic “dark lady” of literature and society, or the subversive, unscrupulous, evil seductress. She lives in a nocturnal world of flagrant transgression, betrayal, manipulation; above all, duplicity emerges as her most seminal value (Bronfen 103-16). The “sexually liberated” female image is always “morally condemned” (Leung 148). Like the classic *femme fatale*, Madame Mao is belligerently rebellious and unconventionally independent, sexually uninhibited, ruthlessly manipulative and ambitious. She is unashamed of using her sex and her intelligence not only to liberate herself from the fetters of society but also to satisfy her lust for power. Her radical portrayal as *femme fatale* explains the official slandering of her as a “white-boned demon” a month after Mao’s demise, and also her arrest as one of the Gang of Four.

Audre Lorde’s essay entitled “Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power” explains how this controversial image of the *femme fatale* can be used as a stepping stone to attain power and prestige:

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.... For women... the erotic [is] considered source of power and information within our lives. (66)

Lorde posits that the “erotic is a resource within each of us” which generates a “source of power.” Therefore, the *femme fatale* figure is intimidating because she is an empowered female who unscrupulously exploits her feminine charms to obtain her desires. Her empowerment is executed through blatant exploitation of her sexual appeal. Her eros is not merely tantalising sexual arousal; it is the fount of her strength. Madame Mao exemplifies this strength, as seen in her relationship with one man after another – Fei, Yu Qiwei, Chao, Tang Nah, Zhang Ming and so forth. It is said that, “[w]ith her husbands and lovers, she takes the initiative. She abandons before being abandoned” (*Becoming Madame Mao* 15). She has control over men instead of being overpowered by them, “[s]he has tea and coffee with powerful men. She puts on makeup for them. She always manages to walk out the last minute” (*Becoming Madame Mao* 59).

Lorde considers the erotic as the “life force” that spurs women to reclaim an authentic and autonomous self (67). From Lorde’s assertion of the erotic as the “life force” of women, it becomes clear that it is fundamentally a force that drives us towards a transformed and empowered self. This is exactly how Madame Mao effects positive change in her life. In fact, Madame Mao admits that “it was simply her nature to conquer the unconquerable – she was attracted

to the challenge, not the man" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 59). Lorde does not deny the fact that "women so empowered are dangerous," but she goes on to say that because of women's empowered eros, "[they] are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of [their] lives other than sex" (67). Lorde also informs us that the erotic has always been considered in a derogatory sense, "the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation" (66). In light of this oppressive view, women who subject themselves to this misconstrued view are rendered contemptible and suspicious of the virtue of the erotic as power. By complying to this, they are incapacitated and resigned to ascetic self-denial, which "keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women" (Lorde 68). Lorde claims that when a woman's life is subjected to "external directives" instead of her "internal knowledge and needs," her life then, will be limited by the external forms and structures that are not based on human need (68). Lorde further explains the importance of being in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves:

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial. (68-69)

Madame Mao is in touch with the erotic; she possesses a knowledge that empowers her and which becomes her means to achieving her life pursuits. In tandem with this "erotic power" is her political involvement, which is indispensable to assuming the position as the most powerful female figure of her time. Refraining from political involvement in the first thirty years of her life with Mao, she eventually achieves her aim by gradually taking absolute control over Chinese theatre. It is during Mao's tribulations over the failure of the Great Leap Forward that his wife's influence became useful and apparent:

I have discussed with Kang Sheng that you will be the best candidate to take command on the ideology side of my business.... From that moment on China is run by Madame Mao Jiang Ching with Mao behind her every move. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 230-39)

Madame Mao, as both Min and history record, springs to Mao's defense because she is insatiably hungry for power. As Fairlynn says, "[y]our true lover is not Mao but the emperor whose clothes he is in. Your true lover is power itself" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 191).

She gains Mao's full support to launch her propaganda through Chinese theatre:

In Mao's name I organize a national festival – the Festival of Revolutionary Operas. I select potential operas and adapt them to serve Mao's purpose. I arrange talented artists to upgrade the pieces into high-quality extravaganzas, such as *Taking the Tiger Mountain by Wit* and *The Sha Family Pond*. I make the operas bear my signature and personally supervise every detail, from the selection of the actors to the way a singer hits the note. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 240)

Theatre has traditionally been a powerful tool functioning as a vital part of China's mass communication and later, a means of disseminating political propaganda. Madame Mao's involvement in a stage career further promulgates feminine agency to the *femme fatale*, elevating her as an authentic modern heroine. She does not accept the limited script to which many women of her time acquiesced: birth, childhood, marriage, motherhood and death. The public may view her as deviant, but Madame Mao as *femme fatale* effectively reverses the destiny of *déclassé* women by translating female weakness into a source of power. Terrill quotes her: "Sex is engaging in the first rounds, but what sustains interest in the long run is power" (123). This is what Lorde heralds as "the erotic as power."

A Nascent Self through Performing Arts

On Madame Mao's use of theatre and performance as a means of constructing her sense of self, it is useful to refer to Erving Goffman's (1959) notion of identity-as-performance. In theatrical performance, the persona is often imputed to the acting individual. In this way, the actor/actress develops identity and becomes closely allied to the social role assumed by the persona. Likewise, Madame Mao's life was a series of performances where she reprised various heroic roles – whether as stage actress in her youth or the later role as "Jiang Ching," the androgynous looking wife of Chairman Mao. Madame Mao's interest and involvement in a stage career profoundly affected her life. In fact, the stage was her means to reinvent herself continuously to the extent that even after she left the stage, she was still acting out her life. In this way, she uses the roles she plays in her life as means to consolidate power.

In the opening scene of *Becoming Madame Mao*, Min's Madame Mao recalls her grandfather introducing her to the world of opera:

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. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 15)

It is on stage that she assumes another identity and attains a new sense of liberty. This explains her desire "to live a heroine's life on stage." When her mother

remarries and leaves her with her grandparents, she “runs away from home and delivers herself to a local troupe” (*Becoming Madame Mao* 15).

Colin Mackerras, in *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey* states that “[p]erformance is as old in China as civilization itself” (13). In fact, “[i]t is chronologically the third culture to devise its own drama tradition after southern Europe, initially Ancient Greece, and India” (221). One striking feature of Chinese theatrical tradition lies in its variety, with Peking Opera (*jingju* or *jingxi*) representing its high point.⁵ With the rise of opera as a national symbol, the status of the stage performer also received equal attention and limelight. It was partly for this fame that Madame Mao strove hard as an actress. Her stage career was pivotal in facilitating her construction as a national figure, just like Mei Lanfang.⁶

However, the stage was not altogether glamorous. The performers' sleazy backgrounds contributed to the harsh, slanted and denigrating views of them. More often than not, stage actresses came from poor, impoverished and destitute households and many had been prostitutes before. On top of that, the actresses' salacious conduct offstage provided a highly unconventional cultural model for modern China. They were portrayed as wanton, wilful women whose sexual promiscuity epitomised “an iconoclastic rejection of the Confucian notion of the ‘good woman’ (*lianjia funü*).” The actresses' involvement in a stage career meant they had “flouted the orthodox social division of ‘men in charge of inside thing’ (*nan zhu wai nü zhu nei*)” (Cheng 206). Therefore, Chinese actresses were despised by the community and occupied the lowest social position, along with slaves and sex workers (Goldstein 400). In Old China and throughout most of the Qing Dynasty, the performing arts were seen as a “mean profession” (*jianye*) and labelled as morally deficient; the performers were even denied the right to take civil service examinations. The scandalous image of performers as lascivious, immoral vagabonds and good-for-nothings shows the contempt, discrimination

⁵ During the Republican era, there were efforts to elevate Peking Opera into a genre representative of Chinese national culture. Most drama historians came to a consensus and dated Peking Opera's consolidation into a coherent genre from around 1845 (Goldstein 379-80; Mackerras, *The Rise of Peking Opera* 154-91). Qi Rushan (1876-62), playwright and drama theorist, was regarded as the trailblazer who dedicated his life to the proposition of Peking Opera as the model for national drama (*guoju*). Goldstein adds that “*Gouju* was just one in a series of nationalising terms that was coined in the Republican era, others include *guoqi* (national flag), *guoyu* (national language), *guoge* (national anthem), and *guohua* (national flower)” (381). His assertion that Peking Opera was the highest form of Chinese theatre was gradually accepted in the twentieth century, around the 1930s (Goldstein 386). For the factors underlying the rise of Peking Opera, refer to Joshua Goldstein's “Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of Peking Opera” (1999) and Colin Mackerras' *The Rise of Peking Opera* (1972).

⁶ Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) was hailed as Peking Opera's premier exponent of female roles (female impersonator known as “dan”). He was esteemed as this national icon in Republican China because of his superb performance as a “dan.” In fact, Mei clinched this legendary standing not only locally, but even at the international level. Heralded as the “Cultural Ambassador,” he travelled to Hong Kong, Japan, France, Russia and the United States to perform (Goldstein 9).

and reproach they suffered at the hands of society at large. They received no protection whatsoever from legal agencies or government (Mackerras, *Chinese Drama* 198). Min paints an accurate scenario of Yunhe's trials. When she decides to become an opera actress, her grandfather opposes her in true traditional fashion:

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. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 15)

At the turn of the twentieth century, actresses gradually reasserted their presence on the traditional stage after a spell of prohibitions against women participating in theatrical performances in several dynasties. The most severe execution of such prohibitions was during Emperor Qianlong's reign (Qing Dynasty).⁷ The social opprobrium against performers slowly changed at the turn of the century. In the last decade of the Qing Dynasty, some minor improvements in their social status were noted when even the Empress Dowager often sent invitations for her favourite performers to perform in the imperial palace (Goldstein 401). Weikun Cheng, in his article "The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin," explores the elements that accounted for the rise of actresses (in Beijing and Tianjin) and focuses on the "actresses' departure from the norms of Confucian womanhood and the symbolic resistance to the cultural hegemony of the male elite" (198). According to Cheng, despite the egregious social discrimination, female performers began to "modify their traditional identity" (200). They were no longer confined to domesticity but enjoyed the possibilities of upward mobility. Their greatest asset was their financial independence and social influence. On stage, they wielded the power of social transformation. Stage actresses, as Cheng puts it,

... were a powerful social and cultural force in early twentieth century.... As entertainers, they emotionally affected thousands of metropolitan citizens through their performances. As mediums for the transmission of ideas, they disseminated norms, values, and moral codes. As gender models, they influenced women's tastes, manners, and ideals. (197)

⁷ Female involvement as professional performers can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty (1523-1028 B.C.) with the royalty-owned singing girls, known as *nüyue*. After the seventeenth century, actresses gradually disappeared from the public stage due to the revival of the Confucian order in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The decline of female performance during the late Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties was sanctioned by the government's severe prohibition. Only in the late nineteenth century did female performers reappear officially in public (Cheng 198-99).

Similarly, Madame Mao's Revolutionary Model Operas (*yangbanxi*) served to canvass the masses' support and at the same time, wielded power for her personal upward mobility. The following excerpt from *Becoming Madame Mao* shows her "vision":

In return for her favor Mao promotes her productions. To pave her way he orders a campaign called Making the Revolutionary-Model Operas Known to Every Household. She feels that she deserves the compensation. In an odd way her marriage with Mao has been transformed and has entered into a new season. Both of them have overcome their personal obstacles to focus on a bigger picture. For him it is the security of his empire and for her, the role of a heroine. In retrospect she not only has broken the Party's restriction, she runs the nation's psyche. She is gripped by the vision that she might eventually carry on Mao's business and rule China after his death. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 275)

Madame Mao sees the "redemptive power" of a stage career in its promise of a "second life" both on and off stage (Zhang 255).

One of the essential features of drama is the spontaneous process of identifying with and impersonating others. Mackerras says that "[c]haracterization and impersonation both imply an attempt to resemble one image of the person being portrayed" (*Chinese Drama* 6-7). Zhang further states:

[i]t is in the process of blending reality with fiction, their personal histories with the lives of the characters they portrayed on the screen, that the collective experience of Chinese women, poised on the threshold of different worlds and destinies... began to receive embodied articulation. (256)

Zhang's crucial observation of the "process of blending reality with fiction" runs thick in Yunhe's veins in *Becoming Madame Mao*. Yunhe's ability to fuse reality with the fictional world comes naturally to her:

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. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 10)

To Yu Qiwei, this life as performance is played out sexually:

Each night, she is different. She loves to perform. Last night she was Nora and tonight she is Lady Yuji. She does this genuinely and effortlessly.... In his arms she realizes that she is capable of playing any role. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 29)

Her “mind” becomes her “stage” and she choreographs reality accordingly (*Becoming Madame Mao* 138). She seeks solace because “[o]n stage she lives out her eternal despair” (*Becoming Madame Mao* 55). Through the continuous staging of her life, she not only dismisses and escapes harsh reality but also reshapes life according to her own making.

After a few successful acting roles as a “provincial actress,” she begins to actualise her dream self (*Becoming Madame Mao* 53). These opportunities pave the way for her success, defying the notion that “females are like grass, born to be stepped on” (*Becoming Madame Mao* 7). Her performance as Nora, from Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), bristles with criticism against the existing order. From the moment the director, Mr. Zhang Min, lays his eyes on her, he knows that Lan Ping is the right person for the role. In China, the interpretation of Ibsen’s works was enmeshed with deep social and political feelings. The fictional “Nora” thus became a symbol of individuality and liberty. According to Elisabeth Eide, in *China Ibsen*, “the term ‘Ibsenism’ came to symbolize a cluster of iconoclastic political ideas comprising female emancipation, liberation of the individual and a critical attitude towards the existing order” (11). Nora, the leading character, was introduced to China during the May Fourth period, when the cry for individuality and subjectivity was brewing. Her final act of slamming the door, leaving behind the fetters that had chained her to her family and restricted her role in society, was a classic act of defiance that caught the imagination of the oppressed Chinese women. It pointed the way for the new female spirit of China to emerge. Nora exemplified the “antithesis of traditional feminine ideas” (Eide 102) and gradually became “a synonym for female emancipation” (Eide 85). The Chinese “transformed [her] into a generative model serving both in the re-evaluation of Chinese pre-1918 women, and as an inspiration to modern Chinese women” (Eide 101). The fictional figure loomed large to the extent that 1935 was called “The Nora Year” by dramatist Tian Han, literary critic A Ying and novelist Mao Dun (Eide 88).

In *Becoming Madame Mao*, Lan Ping regards herself as “Lan Ping-Nora” (58). In her real life, Lan Ping emulates Nora’s indomitable spirit. Her act of running away from home (first with her mother from her elderly and abusive father and next, from her grandparents) is similar to Nora’s departure. Her subsequent acts of abandoning her husbands and lovers (*Becoming Madame Mao* 15) before being abandoned by them distinguish her from the feudal woman who owed loyalty to father, husband and sons. The individual is empowered to shape her own destiny, and Madame Mao sees herself in a line of female heroes like the female Emperor Wu Zetian (Tang Dynasty) and Empress Ci Xi (Qing Dynasty). Both are instances of Chinese female monomaniacs. Terrill compares Madame Mao with contemporaries Eva Perón and Imelda Marcos. In the Philippines’ First Lady, “she [Jiang Qing] had a mirror to see herself as she wished to be seen: powerful

and attractive, a success in politics without ceasing to be successful as a woman” (336). Terrill remarks on her resemblance to Eva Perón:

If it is the former Argentine First Lady, a political prima-donna and folk hero, who more than any other woman in the political life of our time resembles Jiang Qing, it is perhaps because a courtesan's and an actress's bent lay behind the most unstoppable willfulness of both women. Jiang... showed the same traits of self-dramatization, extreme subjectivity, and a shuttling back and forth between reality and the script that made Eva Perón (and would make Jiang) passionately followed, deeply reviled, and always the focus of attention. (197-98)

Terrill also observes that both women turned the traumas of their early years into sources of creativity and independence, and both assumed power that had slipped from their weakened husbands. These comparisons put her on par with successful and empowered women in the world, thus underscoring Min's fictional portrayal of Madame Mao as a dynamic, self-constructed heroine.

Min thinks of Madame Mao as a feminist who was “caught up in Mao's political and personal whirlpool.” She was exemplary in leading the Chinese women, who perpetually struggled to shed the constraints of their traditions and to embrace a more authentic and empowered self. Li, in her comparison of Chinese woman in the past and present, says that a woman's ultimate goal out of this struggle is to “emerge as a new being”:

China is an old country, tied down by various conventions and traditions, torn asunder within, defeated and humiliated without; yet she is trying to regenerate herself, to take her rightful place in the family of nations, and to find her own soul. It is out of this melting pot that the Chinese woman is trying to emerge as a new being. (85)

Min's Madame Mao thus stands as an eminent female hero. Rejecting the Confucian notion of the “good woman,” she presents and asserts herself in new social roles, thus changing society's perceptions of women. Her obsession to “get on the stage” is fuelled by her belief that a stage career would help her to achieve her dreams (*Becoming Madame Mao* 189). As we can see, she manipulates her theatrical career to reverse the destiny of the *déclassé* woman. Min demonstrates how her entire life delineates a movement from the fringe to the centre.

Bronfen discusses how the “*femme fatale* can be understood as a particularly resilient contemporary example of tragic sensibility” (104-05). She explains:

One can speak of tragic sensibility in conjunction with the *femme fatale* in part because she inevitably comes to recognize that her radical insistence on

independence is a delusion, which was meant to stave off a recognition of her own fallibility. (106)

Similarly, Madame Mao insists on her innocence and puts the blame entirely on Mao's shoulders, ironically resorting and appealing to male responsibility when it suits her. However, Min is sympathetic to her sense of insecurity and struggle:

Mao is simply my curse. I would never wish a love like this for my daughter. It is just too hard. I am driven by a fatal impulse. Like a bruised salmon I swim against the current to find my way back to the birth river. I worry that if I stop for only a second, Mao might turn away and my life will fall apart. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 246)

Terrill notes how the historical figure claimed that “[e]verything I did, Mao told me to do. I was his dog; what he said to bite, I bit” (15). With her death sentence, later commuted to life imprisonment, however, Madame Mao finally realises the inevitable tragic sequence. Bronfen says:

... she becomes fully tragic at the moment of *anagnorisis*, because it is here that she can recognize her desire for freedom as attainable only in death. (106; italics in the original)

She decides that suicide is the only satisfactory escape from the ignominy of life imprisonment:

It is time to empty the stage. Remember, you will always come across me in the books about China. Don't be surprised to see my name smeared. There is nothing more they can do to me. And don't forget that I was an actress, a great actress. I acted with passion. For those who are fascinated by me you owe me applause, for those who are disgusted you may spit. I thank you all for coming. (*Becoming Madame Mao* 337)

The irony and pathos of her melodramatic exit are all too clear. The freedom she desires is possible only in death by her own hand. She blames Mao, the man, but finally chooses to determine her own significant ending. Madame Mao makes a grand gesture, staying true to her conviction that life is played out on stage, and that the grand illusion of greatness is preferable to the paltry reality of life in prison, waiting for death executed by the hands of her enemies. In her exit, her tone is exultant and defiant. She will not concede defeat. She is still the “peacock among hens.”

Conclusion

In reality, Madame Mao was only a starlet. However, her real life was akin to the

life of a grand actress. Even as she made her exit, her tone defied defeat. It echoed Hemingway's code hero in *The Old Man and the Sea*: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (Hemingway 103).

Min, through the choice of historical fiction, humanises Madame Mao, who has long been demonised in China. Madame Mao was a product of her culture. From a young age she was told, "females are like grass, born to be stepped on" (*Becoming Madame Mao* 7). In spite of the shackles of predominantly male-favoured norms, she rises to become an empowered female heroine. However, Min does not exonerate her from her heinous crimes and atrocities during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, but more importantly, it is to pinpoint her as an iconoclastic figure that deserves to be acknowledged as an empowered female; at least for her resilient feminine power, if not her tremendous struggle from poverty and obscurity to professional success and fame. To quote Hu Shi, a "[w]oman must occupy a very important position before she can ruin a city or a nation" (Li, "Chinese Woman" 5). Madame Mao proves herself to be truly a self-constructed heroine.

Twenty-five years on, to align these monumental moments of Madame Mao's life with recent perspectives and developments, it can be said that contemporary Chinese women have come a long way in their struggles against the entrenched traditional patriarchal norms that used to subjugate Chinese women and deprive them of equal opportunities in many facets of life. As recently as January 2014, a woman sued a firm for gender discrimination – a case that is believed to be the first in China.⁸ In hindsight, Madame Mao breaks barriers and sets an example to contemporary Chinese women of the possibility of independence and self-sufficiency.

Works Cited

- Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire." *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004): 103-16.
- Cheng, Weikun. "The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin." *Modern China* 22.2 (1996): 197-233.
- Eide, Elisabeth. *China's Ibsen*. London: Curzon Press, 1987.
- Fincer, Leta Hong. "China's Growing Gender Gap: Women are not Just 'Leftover' but Left Out." *The Guardian*. 12 May 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/may/12/china-leftover-women-property-boom>. 7 March 2016.

⁸ Leta Hong Fincer, "China's Growing Gender Gap: Women are not Just 'Leftover' but Left Out."

- Goldstein, Joshua. "Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of Peking Opera, 1912-1930." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7.2 (1999): 377-420.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. NY: Macmillan, 1986.
- Honig, Emily. "Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards." *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Eds. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom. California: University of California Press, 2002.
- Lessing, Doris. *The Four-Gated City*. New York: Bantam, 1970.
- Leung, Lai-fong. "In Search of Love and Self: The Image of Young Female Intellectuals in Post-Mao Women's Fiction." *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*. Ed. Michael S. Duke. London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989.
- Li, Yu-ning, ed. *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*. NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991.
- Litzinger, Ralph. "Tradition and the Gender of Civility." *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. California: University of California Press, 2002.
- Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Whole Earth Review* 63 (1989): 66-69.
- . *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984.
- Mackerras, Colin P. *The Rise of Peking Opera: 1770-1870*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- . *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey*. Beijing: New World Press, 1990.
- Min, Anchee. *Becoming Madame Mao*. New York: First Mariner Books, 2001.
- . Interview. "Questions and Answers with Anchee Min." <<http://carolinanavy.com/navy/creativewriting/sking/ancheemin/quest.html>>. 31 April 2004.
- Pearson, Carol and Katherine Pope. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1981.
- Terrill, Ross. *Madame Mao, A White-boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong*. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1995.
- Zhang, Qing. "The Delicacy, Masculinization, and De-genderization of Women's Literature." *Dangdai Zuojiia Pinglun* 3 (1986): 43-47.