



## Empress Orchid

By Anchee Min

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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.

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## Empress Orchid By Anchee Min Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Talk about story arc: poor girl from rural China auditions for a job as royal concubine, winds up as emperor's wife number four, gives birth to the "last Emperor," rules China as regent for 46 years. The fascinating, implausible life of Tsu Hsi, or "Orchid," was reviled by the revolutionary Chinese, but here it receives a sympathetic treatment from Min (*Red Azalea; Becoming Madame Mao*), who once again brilliantly lifts the public mask of a celebrated woman to reveal a contradictory character. Sexually assertive, intellectually ambitious, socially striving, Min's Orchid is also "isolated, tense, and in some vague but very real way, dissatisfied." Even after giving birth to the emperor's only son, Orchid feels trapped by the stultifying imperial rituals and persecuted by the other residents of the Forbidden City: six other royal wives, 3,000 invisible concubines and 2,000 scheming eunuchs. In addition to these powerful distractions, she has to discipline her overindulged son, outmaneuver the ruthless politician Su Shun (who wants her buried alive when the emperor dies) and advise the ailing emperor how to fend off both the Boxers and the Western "barbarians." Min, herself a survivor of China's Cultural Revolution, has done a prodigious amount of on-site research to capture the glorious, hopeless last days of the Ching dynasty. At times her writing is textbook-flat, and she sometimes loses track of her teeming cast of characters (for example, Orchid's dangerous mother-in-law and mentally ill sister). But readers will be enthralled by the gorgeously woven cultural tapestry and the psychologically astute portrait of the empress—a talented girl from the provinces who married (way) up.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Min, author of the acclaimed *Becoming Madame Mao*, which fictionalized the life of a woman demonized in history books, again melds exhaustive historical and political research with expertly articulated characters in *Empress Orchid*. Critics praised the novel's linguistic dexterity (once in the U.S., Min had to learn English in six months or face deportation) and revelatory insights into the lives of women possessing few rights. Too many characters and events muddle the plot, and the style wavers from glittering to dull. Yet ultimately, the novel provides a valuable glimpse into the daily habits of fascinating historical characters and charts the last, decadent days of an empire.

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From [Booklist](#)

In her second powerful and brilliantly conceived fictionalized portrait of a strong and controversial woman intrinsic to Chinese culture, Min continues to fulfill her mission to tell the truth about her homeland, particularly China's long tradition of demonizing women. In *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000), Min portrays a vilified twentieth-century figure. Here she steps back to the nineteenth century to illuminate the extraordinary life of the Last Empress of China, Tzu Hsi, or Orchid. The official version castigates the empress as a conniving concubine responsible for the collapse of the Ch'ing Dynasty as China came under assault by European powers, but Min considers her a shrewd and courageous survivor, political tactician, and leader worthy of deep respect. Writing with vigor, clarity, and lavish detail, Min tells Orchid's consuming story through the empress' sharp eyes as she rose, through great sacrifice, from abject poverty to the lonely position of fourth concubine to become the besieged emperor's most trusted advisor and mother of his only son and heir. Steeped in the Forbidden City's elaborate mythology, etiquette, and ritual, Min evokes a doomed realm so opulent, complex, and bizarre that it seems as fantastic as an alternative world in science fiction, but Orchid is 100 percent human, and her earthy story is true and significant. This bewitching novel

ends with the empress' struggle to secure power after the emperor's death; Min plans to dramatize Orchid's ensuing 46-year rule in the second installment of her insightful, magnetic, and quietly revolutionary resurrection of a remarkable woman. *Donna Seaman*  
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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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