

Surviving the Religion of Mao

TRANSCRIPT

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. Author Anchee Min has won acclaim for her memoir of growing up in China under Mao Zedong. She's also written several works of fiction in which she explores the human hunger to survive against extreme social brutality. This hour, we'll explore what Anchee Min learned about the human spirit in the forced labor camp in which she spent her teen-age years, and how she's found healing in America. I mean, you turn into animals because you don't feel love. I mean, it's a very complex thing. It has to do with poverty. It has to do with education and religions and background and everything. But in the fundamental sense, when humans are allowed to be humans, they start to transform.

MS. ANCHEE MIN: I mean, you turn into animals because you don't feel love. I mean, it's a very complex thing. It has to do with poverty. It has to do with education and religions and background and everything. But in the fundamental sense, when humans are allowed to be humans, they start to transform.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

[Announcements]

Program:

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. My guest today, Anchee Min, was born in Shanghai in 1957 in a China ruled by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Her personal story is marked by intense tragedy and theatrical turning points, much like the history of the China she writes about. In her late 20s, Anchee Min came to America. Now she writes fiction and nonfiction in lyrical English prose, exploring the fragility and resilience of the human spirit in circumstances of social brutality.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about belief, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, author Anchee Min on "Surviving the Religion of Mao."

MS. MIN: I was taught to write "I love you, Chairman Mao" before I was taught to write my own name. I never thought I belonged to myself. It was never "I love you, Papa" and "I love you, Mama"; it's always "I love you, Communist Party of China," "I love you, Chairman Mao." What I want to say is that Mao was our religion.

MS. TIPPETT: Formal religion plays only a small role in Anchee Min's writings, but her characters and stories embody the mix of traditions that have formed the Chinese sense of self from ancient times.

Buddhism and Taoism mingle with the ideas of China's defining philosopher, Confucius. In the sixth century B.C.E., he described what he called "right behavior" as the key to social good. Acting noble was tantamount to being good. Anchee Min writes that this philosophy can create a practical and unsentimental disregard for a person's inner life. She says that the Communist Party under Mao Zedong ruthlessly manipulated Confucianism for political ends. Here's the voice of Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, who ruled China from 1949 to 1976.

MR. MAO ZEDONG: (From file footage, foreign language spoken)

MS. TIPPETT: In 1966, when Anchee Min was nine years old, Mao officially launched the Cultural Revolution. He created the Red Guards, harnessing the energy and zeal of youth to enforce a paranoid anti-intellectual ideology in every corner of Chinese society: Children denounced parents, neighbors denounced neighbors. As a devoted teen-age member of the Red Guard, Anchee Min was sent to a forced labor camp to learn the higher calling of becoming a peasant for the greater good of China and the world. Here's how she introduces that period of her life in her memoir, *Red Azalea*.

READER: "When I was seventeen, life changed to a different world. The school's vice principal had a talk with me after his talks with many others. He told me that he wanted to remind me that I was a student leader, a model to the graduates. The policy was there, as strict as math equations. He told me that I belonged to one category, the category of becoming a peasant. He said it was an unalterable decision. The policy from Beijing was a holy instruction. It was universally accepted. It was incumbent upon me to obey.

"He said he had sent four of his own children to work in the countryside. He was very proud of them. He said that twenty million Chinese worked on these farms. He said many more words, words of abstractions, words like songs. He said when one challenges heaven, it brings pleasure; when one challenges the earth, it brings pleasure; when one challenge's one's own kind, it brings the biggest pleasure. He was reciting the poem by Mao. He said a true Communist would love to take challenges. She would take it with dignity. I was seventeen. I was inspired. I was eager to devote myself. I was looking forward to hardship."

From Anchee Min's memoir, *Red Azalea*.

MS. TIPPETT: I interviewed Anchee Min at her home near San Francisco.

MS. TIPPETT: Something that's always fascinated me about China that I'd like to understand more is I think China is this great civilization, this great ancient civilization, which, unlike many of the other great cultures, hasn't had a major religion at its core. I want to refer to your books all the way through and how this comes out in your books, but I think I might just start by asking you to talk about how you experienced this thing, faith, you know, growing up in China, and what that meant to you, and how did it manifest itself?

MS. MIN: I would say that it never occurred to me that I should think about it and because I never thought I belonged to myself.

MS. TIPPETT: That you belonged to yourself?

MS. MIN: Right. Because I was taught to write "I love you, Chairman Mao" before I was taught to write my own name. It was never "I love you, Papa," never "I love you, Mama." It's always "I love you, Communist Party of China." "I love you, Chairman Mao."

And now looking back, I think the dictator really manipulated something that in human nature that's very profound and decent, that is a desire to be good. And I think that you call faith. I don't know how to put it. It's just something that sustains us, made the meaning out of life. And I think that's what the whole Chinese culture is basically about. Even Mao and the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution tried everything to erase that, to destroy that kind of faith.

It was not successful because I think the grassroots people like my grandmother, she lived by the Yangtze River, a small town. She had bound feet, and I always feel that's her way of living. It had a great impact, a great influence on me, which is basically just be good to others and then you'll be good to yourself. And I think with that notion, I think the Chinese culture is formed that way. And then when it's manipulated by Mao — and he was so, in a way, brilliant knowing how to use his people by provoke the desire in his people to be good.

For example, this is how he launched the nation's campaign against Americans in Vietnam. And he would say that Americans are in Vietnam slaughtering the Viet Cong, and China will be next. Now, first he instill fear in us, so we live in this nightmare every day. And we watched the movies — propaganda movies — how the Americans soldiers scooped the Viet Cong's — girls my age — scooped their eyes out and thinking that I would be the next. And so when Mao says, beautifully, he said man of humanity were to refuse to preserve his life at the expense of that humanity. So we feel that we are honored to look into the future. To me, personally, dreaming about, go to Vietnam, jump into American soldier and blow myself up and blow them, too, and feel my life I devoted to a good cause. And I think of inside I feel so torn and so—this deep disagreement with that.

MS. TIPPETT: So there are a few different things here I want to go into. And just again, to talk about the culture in China that you grew up in, maybe a lot of this wasn't spoken or articulated, but this idea of behavior as being so important, as sort of taking precedence over your inner feelings. That's very Chinese,

isn't it? I mean, doesn't that come all the way from Confucius?

MS. MIN: Yeah, I think so. What I want to say is that Mao was our religion. His drive for goodness, his drive to liberate the poor people in America, save the American children was a religion and a strive for goodness.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. I know there's a line in *Red Azalea* you wrote about how ennobling this was as a young person, right? I mean, you said, "Not for a day did I not feel heroic."

MS. MIN: Right. We were taught if you can sacrifice your loved ones, if you can denounce your parents, if you can denounce your favorite teacher, you are capable of greater love for the humanity. Because the smaller love you feel this person — if this person is proven to be American spy, and your parents are proven to be the enemy of our society, and then it's always like good battles the evil and we want the good to win. It's such a grand disguise and things got messed up. And in the meantime, as the executor of such greatness, I didn't feel good. I was crying when I was denouncing my favorite teacher. It was tearing myself all apart.

MS. TIPPETT: Anchee Min was just 11 when the local secretary of the Communist Party coerced her to denounce her most beloved teacher, whose name was Autumn Leaves. She knew her teacher's life would be ruined, but on a stage before an assembly of 2,000 she called her a "class enemy, an American spy." Here's part of that story from Anchee Min's memoir, *Red Azalea*.

READER: "Autumn Leaves called my name and asked if I really believed that she was an enemy of the country. If I did not think so, could I tell her who assigned me to do the speech? She said she wanted the truth. She said Chairman Mao always liked to have children show their honesty. She asked me with the exact same tone she used when she helped me with my homework. Her eyes were demanding me to focus on them. I could not bear looking at her eyes. They had looked at me when the magic of mathematics was explained. They had looked at me when the beautiful little mermaid story was told. When I won the first place in the Calculation-with-Abacus Competition, they had looked at me with joy; when I was ill, they had looked at me with sympathy and love. I had not realized the true value of what all this meant to me until I lost it forever that day at the meeting.

"I heard people shouting at me. My head felt like a boiling teapot. Autumn Leaves' eyes behind the thick glasses now were like gun barrels shooting at me with fire. Just be honest! her hoarse voice raised to its extreme. I turned to Secretary Chain. He nodded at me as if to say, Are you going to lose to an enemy? He was smiling scornfully. Think about the snake, he said. Yes, the snake, I remembered. It was a story Mao told in his book. It was about a peasant who found a frozen snake lying in his path on a snowy day. The snake had the most beautiful skin the peasant had ever seen. He felt sorry for her and decided to save her life. He picked up the snake and put her into his jacket to warm her with the heat of his body. Soon the snake woke up and felt hungry. She bit her savior. The peasant died. Our chairman's point is, Secretary Chain said as he ended the story, to our enemy we must be absolutely cruel and merciless."

From Anchee Min's memoir, *Red Azalea*.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media, today with author Anchee Min on surviving what she calls "the religion of Chairman Mao's China." She came to understand the cult of Mao as a logical extension of the Imperial Age. China's emperors were believed to be divine. So as she made sense of what happened to her in a 20th-century labor camp, she found herself revisiting Chinese history.

She's written a historical novel about China's last imperial court and its last empress, Orchid — a world peopled by eunuchs and concubines. In order to ensure the royal line of descent, the only other men in the lavish imperial enclosure, the Forbidden City, were eunuchs who had been sexually mutilated in their youth. They were the children of impoverished families who hoped that their damaged sons might find a better life. They acted as servants, but also as guards and spies, over the emperor's 3,000 concubines.

MS. TIPPETT: I think that in coming at your work and trying, as I say, between the lines, to think about what you were writing about that had to do with the spiritual aspect of being human, I realized for the first time that, for you, doing the work that you're doing now, which is your latest book, *Empress Orchid*, going back to ancient Chinese history, in fact, it's all connected with these questions of what it means to be Chinese and how that's changing now, isn't it? Because there is such a spiritual connection with ancestors and with

history in a way that maybe Americans can't understand.

Ms. MIN: Well, it was very sad period in China at that time, and also it's very closely connected with madness.

Ms. TIPPETT: With madness?

Ms. MIN: Mm-hmm. You see, the Forbidden City, an emperor is told that he can tell the sun when to shine and rain when to shower. But, in fact, he couldn't do anything about the invasion of China. He knew that. That's a problem, right? He couldn't handle it. So it's like mentally depressed and they feel absolutely helpless. And for these women, the 3,000 concubines tried to compete for one man's affection. Many of them never get to meet their husband in their lifetime, and also they're deprived from ever bearing children. And I studied history of Chinese embroidery, especially by the imperial concubines, almost every one of them spent years and years, their youth, their dreams, onto this embroidery themed "100 Children Play on the Ground." So we can kind of sense these women being driven mad. In their madness, their imagination thrived.

Ms. TIPPETT: That those are their children?

Ms. MIN: They imagined that that's the children...

Ms. TIPPETT: That they would have had.

Ms. MIN: You know, they so many children play. And one of them, they might get to be having them, you know, in the next life. And you have these eunuchs, they got their organs removed, and their biggest dream was to buy back their male organ, and so they can be buried one piece.

Ms. TIPPETT: I would say in Christianity there's this large tradition of celibacy and of sexual control as a spiritual discipline, and then in this Forbidden City that you write about, there's this huge tradition of the eunuchs, and it's such a terrible perversion of that idea. I mean, it's enforced, physically enforced discipline.

Ms. MIN: Yeah. I make connection with that with the labor camp experience. It's strange that as I was writing the eunuchs and the process of how they became who they are, and the sickness of the mind, how that came to formation, I feel that I almost knew exactly how that would happen, how the sick mind was created. In the labor camp, we were mentally castrated.

I mean, you know, I'm jumping forward about my being American. Today I do want to offer — I see my daughter wants to offer — to share this happiness which, when I was in China, when I was eating out of garbage cans, I feel that I probably, because of my mother's teaching, I never really wanted to grab everything to myself. And I was never that strong. But I saw kids — they just tear each other up. They would pull my hair, put soy sauce in it, step on me, beat me up, just for one piece of cabbage leaf. I mean, you're turning to animals because you don't feel love. I mean, it's a very complex thing. It has to do with poverty. It has to do with education and religions and background and everything. But in the fundamental sense, when humans are allowed to be humans, they start to transform. When that's taken away in the labor camp, 100,000 youths, aged from 17 to 25, were not allowed to date. The price of date was death, if caught.

Ms. TIPPETT: OK, so this is helping me. Because, you know, again I keep asking this same question about how cruel people would be to each other in these extreme situations. I mean, you just tell one story after the other about sort of routine cruelty and meanness, right? Because I really think there is such a thing as human nature. It's almost like you're describing a different human nature in that China that you know. There's something in me that wants to resist that idea.

Ms. MIN: Yes. But the picture is...

MS. TIPPETT: But maybe you're giving a description.

MS. MIN: ...that we were growing rice. And this is when they would need to focus. We need to take ourselves out of our nature and replace it with something else. We thought we were machines, slaves just for this gather together a billion people to save the world. And that is so mistaken and is so far away and is so grand. It's like, you know, because it's a fantasy, you know, it gets us to do what we did. You know, of course when we do love, we know the price of love. And that relationship built is absolutely — how do you say? It's the best of the human heart could perform in such extraordinary, impossible situations. And I think that's what *Empress Orchid* performed. In *Empress Orchid*, in my book, I would try to show this human spirit that tried to survive.

MS. TIPPETT: I think in the labor camp you had this very important friendship and love with your friend Yan, right? Is that how you say it?

MS. MIN: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. So you were, I mean, you were young people all of you, you're not allowed to date. That creates a form of madness. There's this intensity, it seems like, even just about physical contact or about any kind of human relationship. And then even that kind of ordinary human relationship became a form of incredible self-sacrifice and risk, didn't it?

MS. MIN: Yeah. We tried to be less than who we were but we couldn't. And I feel that it was the spiritual where we share that love that we were able to survive. So when you talk about faith, that was the faith that made us. I don't know how many people came out of the labor camps to a normal — if they were capable of love. Many people just gone completely.

And I saw Mao. He had all his children either damaged during the war or killed, his eldest son killed by Americans in Korean War. And he suffered tremendous loss. His wife was slaughtered by Kuomintang. And you expect him to understand, expect him to not to do what he did for his people during the cultural revolution. But he seems to be cold and numb and unfeeling completely. So I think that needs to be analyzed, that needs to be talked about. Red China is in denial, and it's very sensitive on that subject. Can't talk about Mao. And I think he's such a great example of how a human could be put in such a situation and develop a sickness of the mind that would never heal.

MS. TIPPETT: Chinese-American memoirist and novelist Anchee Min. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, we'll hear how she's found healing in her life in America by writing and becoming, as she says, more Chinese than ever before.

At speakingoffaith.org, hear unheard cuts of Anchee Min describing growing up in the social brutality of Mao's China, listen to this program again, download a MP3 to your desktop, or subscribe to our free weekly podcast. Listen when you want wherever you want. All this and more at speakingoffaith.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "Surviving the Religion of Mao," a conversation with Chinese-American author Anchee Min on the fragility and resilience of the human spirit in circumstances of social brutality.

In her historical fiction as well as her memoirs, Anchee Min explores the spiritual sensibility of China, ancient and modern. At 17, she was sent to a forced labor camp, like millions of others, during the Communist Cultural Revolution. They suffered physical exhaustion and privation. Anchee Min has a permanent spinal cord injury, which prevents her from sitting on her right side. At the center of her memoir of that experience, Anchee Min describes her guilt at her memory of one young woman, Little Green, who was never the same again after her love affair was exposed.

Anchee Min's own life took an unexpected turn when party officials from the Shanghai Movie Studios took her away to play Madame Mao in propaganda dramas. But before she left, she'd formed an intense, forbidden, loving relationship with her friend Yan.

MS. TIPPETT: I guess the two stories that come to mind as I think of whatever out of your works are, you mentioned a while ago you denounced your favorite teacher. That that was a real turning point where the conflict in you then came out because you'd been such a great patriot, and then that was a terribly painful experience. And she wouldn't forgive you later, right?

MS. MIN: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: And then your friend Yan, who you loved, and then you sort of had a different fate and she stayed there. And I wonder, are you able to forgive yourself? And how do you bear the burden of those memories?

MS. MIN: By writing. I probably wouldn't be writing all these books if I don't feel those — you know, how do you call — the guilt.

MS. TIPPETT: You were put into these impossible situations, right? And in both of those cases you almost didn't have choices not to hurt those people, and yet I can imagine that you still carry that.

MS. MIN: Yeah. I abandoned them. You know, I thought to myself, "In America at least I could write about Little Green's story," because nobody is writing about this story.

MS. TIPPETT: And Little Green was the woman who had an affair, right, at the labor camp.

MS. MIN: She was caught in a wheat field coupling with her lover. And then denounced her lover, with the help of Yan and others, and believing that she was doing something good. And then her lover was executed, and then she went mad.

MS. TIPPETT: And they were really just two teenagers who fell in love.

MS. MIN: Right. Right. And I feel that the Cultural Revolution is not Madame Mao's fault, not just Mao's fault, as we put it right now. Everybody is, you know, guilt-free in China. It's we who participated, and we did it. It's so easy just to forget. You know, I think that I — maybe that's the driving force and I was not even aware of it. I don't understand why I don't sit here on my left butt, you know, writing year after year.

MS. TIPPETT: Because of your injuries in the labor camp that you have to sit on your left side, yeah.

MS. MIN: Right. Right. It's a spinal cord distortion. And why I'm doing this? I think it must be — you brought it up today — I think it must be those things that I would not be able to live with. You asked me how I changed. I think coming to America plays a big part. If I were in China, I would die in confusion because this problem that's the mental knot. I couldn't unknot it, and I couldn't do anything about it. And I was too close, I didn't have a perspective, couldn't see. So coming to America, I think, the moment that struck me was that, you know, my daughter was in the nursery school. First thing she was taught was love. And then she would, you know, come home and say, "Everybody's different, but everybody's perfect." Things like that. You know, it moves me.

And also, the incredible moment I share with other immigrants on the day that we were accepted as American citizens in the big hall in L.A. with 40,000 people, which is so ridiculous. You know, it was like we're all prepared, you know, different languages, struggle, try to get the English right. When the music comes on, (singing) "Oh, say" — we all couldn't finish the first sentence, just broke down crying. And we laugh, smiling and crying and looking at each other. We know what it's like to be American. It was to be allowed to be human, to be ourselves. You know, moments like this. And also, you don't want me to go on with all these, you know...

MS. TIPPETT: No, it's fine. Go on.

MS. MIN: ...great things about I feel that I'm more Chinese in America than I could feel if I was in China. You know, the moment I step on my motherland in China, my guard will be up. I talk differently, behave differently.

MS. TIPPETT: So how can you be more Chinese here? Just because you can be yourself, and yourself is Chinese?

MS. MIN: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: Your second book was a novel called *Katherine*. And it was about an American teacher who came to teach a group of Chinese students. And in some ways she becomes their encounter with America.

MS. MIN: Right. Right.

MS. TIPPETT: I just wonder if that book is also a description in some way of your encounter with America?

MS. MIN: Yes. Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, one thing that I noticed in that book — and it's not so much in your other writing — is you talk about religious things. You know, there's a question you ask, "Do I have a soul?" And you talk about the Great Void. You mention sort of religious conversations the protagonist has with her friend. And I guess I'm asking if does America make you think about these things differently?

MS. MIN: I will say that I still try to understand how the religion played a role in Americans' lives. And, for me, the religion — the Chinese religion, which my grandmother was a Taoist — it's so practical. And for my mother it was very practical. And my grandmother's story was that she was Buddhist. And she never talk about her religion. She'd just live it, be kind to others, and take whatever that's in. If it's bad, she let it go. She doesn't, you know, just dwell on it. She's always very positive. And if she had to yell, she'd yell at her chickens. And sometimes she'd tell me that she doesn't want a hearing aid because being deaf has its good side. So she saw, you know, other people mouthing bad things, and she was smiling. "I don't hear you."

And for my mother is the opposite. I found my mother kind of strange. I connected with her deeply, and yet there is hardly any connection. But since she's my mother, you know, you just grow up in her. You're part of her tissue. So I remember when I came home after the denunciation and breaking down crying...

MS. TIPPETT: When you denounced your teacher. Yeah.

MS. MIN: ..."I did my job." Right. And I was awarded by the school and the principal and the entire district, the neighborhood, with red color, the certificate of Mao's Good Child. And I was so proud. I was *the* child, the best child in the neighborhood, and yet my mother refused to put that certificate on the wall. She was not happy and told me she wants to disown me. And I was very confused. But she said something. She said, "Your father and I are teachers. Imagine if our student come up and denounce us, how I feel?" She instill this common sense in me that conflict with my vanity and my devotion to Mao's words. And so Mao's being decent, "Be a good child to sacrifice for the world's best cause" conflicted with my mother's little statement.

MS. TIPPETT: You tell that story in the book. Didn't she even quote Confucius, sounding like Jesus. It's the Golden Rule, right?

MS. MIN: Yeah.

READER: Anchee Min writes:

"My mother shut me out of the house for six hours. She said being my mother made her ashamed. I wrote

what my mother asked of me 1,000 times. It was an old teaching passed down since Confucius. It said Do not treat others how you yourself would not like to be treated. My mother demanded I copy it on rice paper using ink and a brush pen. She said, I want to carve this phrase in your mind. You are not my child if you ever disobey this teaching."

From Anchee Min's memoir, *Red Azalea*.

MS. TIPPETT: Is it right that your mother was Christian and that you didn't know that?

MS. MIN: Well, yes. Right. She was smart. She did not share who she really was with me. I could have very well reported her, because that was: you see how my neighbors denounce their fathers, and this is like that.

MS. TIPPETT: But how did you find out?

MS. MIN: I never found out before I came to America probably. I would get up at midnight and went to the restroom finding my mother on her knees in the dark. And I said, "Mom, what's going on? You all right?" She says, "I'm OK. Fine." Never explained anything. So I grew up always saw her like that. So I thought my mother was weird.

And then only after the Cultural Revolution then before I came to America, China — the first church in China opened, and my mother went Christmas Eve. And I went with her. And she never bothered to tell me where she went, why she went, what she was there for. She just went, and then because she had a stroke and she couldn't really walk well, so my father asked me to escort her. So I went there, I discovered in shock that she knew all the songs. And I found the song was beautiful. (Singing) "Silent night." So I ask her to teach me the song, so she taught me a song. It was one of her happy moments. We sang duet. I did not know what that says to her.

MS. TIPPETT: And then did she tell you that she'd been Christian, or that she was Christian?

MS. MIN: No. She refused to discuss with me because I think she thought I was too brainwashed. I joked with her. I say, "Well, you call God, and then see if God can help you get your daughter — my younger sister — out of the labor camp." So she became very serious, and she told me that, "Don't you ever insult God. I don't want to speak with you on that term."

MS. TIPPETT: Did you ever have a conversation with her about that before she died, learn more?

MS. MIN: No. I think she told me enough. The reason that my mother survived the Cultural Revolution was because of her faith in Christianity, now I look at it. I saw her expression when she was denounced by her school people because she was having high blood pressure and she misprinted "A long life to Chairman Mao." And she was denounced as an anti-revolutionary. And she was able to come out of it. I saw this expression on her. She was not among us. Now I know she was off with her own God. And I think she tried to share that with us, and so all her life.

MS. TIPPETT: To share it with you without talking about it, in a way.

MS. MIN: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: Just to share the spirit of it.

MS. MIN: Yes, and I think that's really the essence of if you ask me to believe in Jesus, I would believe in my mother's teachings and her examples.

By the end of the month I have to wash the rice jar because we're out of rice, just to make a porridge out of basically water. But my mother, the first month when she get her salary, she make buns, steamed buns. She always had me to send to the tailor because he had a bump on his head. It's a tumor, something, and he couldn't afford any treatment. So my mother would just say nothing, just have me, and I would, I was

so, my eyes were just eating this bread, you know? Feel like we are having nothing to eat, and then my mother would so generously send me; it was almost like a ritual. She is a very stubborn woman. She has her principles.

MS. TIPPETT: Chinese-American novelist and memoirist Anchee Min. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Anchee Min is describing what she's learned about the human spirit and the nature of religion through growing up in Mao's Communist China. Here's a reading from her 1995 novel, *Katherine*.

READER: "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was pronounced officially ended in 1980. I was now a former revolutionary, a status shared by millions. Chairman Mao had described himself as a servant of the people, but he was just another emperor. For 27 years he played with our minds. Our heads were jars of Maoist pork marinating in 5,000-year-old feudalist soy sauce. This spoiled mixture produced generations of smelly, rotten thoughts. The thoughts multiplied like bacteria. Since 1976 we had been singing an elegy for Chairman Mao. Now we were singing for our own vanished souls."

From Anchee Min's novel *Katherine*.

MS. TIPPETT: You told me about your grandmother and your mother, and if I ask you now, in your life now, what that word "faith" means, what comes to mind for you?

MS. MIN: Comes mind to me is that the ability and the consciousness of me making a choice. And faith to me is that it only shines, it only tells who you really are, and you encounter faith when you're at the point of where you can make a choice. It's not like a choice is there. It's so easy to make. You know, I can offer my neighbor, say, "OK, I can take care of your dog." Faith is when there's absolutely — when you have no choice, yet you are forced to make a choice. And that's how you act out whether you have good faith. And then that really plays: you will be who you are and will show who you are at that moment.

MS. TIPPETT: Like, give me an example. I mean, what do you think of in your life how that plays itself out? We haven't talked about God at all, and I don't think, I mean, God is not really part of your imagination, is it? It doesn't seem like it's really part of the Chinese imagination, but tell me if I'm wrong.

MS. MIN: Well, you're right about it. But I think Chinese believes in a higher force. There is a force. My father's an instructor in astronomy. You know, at night he goes to meet his stars. And I asked him, I said "Do you believe in God?" He said, "I don't necessarily believe in the image of a God, you know, on the Sistine Chapel. But I do believe there's a force. It's a spiritual force. And the biggest force is in yourself." You know, that's a very Buddhism. That the Buddha is inside of you, and that's how we see it.

MS. TIPPETT: Is that how you see it also?

MS. MIN: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: I notice all the way through your works, you — in your writing — you know, you quote poetry, often ancient Chinese poetry and lines from operas, the way some people would quote scriptures. It seems that there's something very sacred for you in some of those kinds of texts.

MS. MIN: I think it because I was so, grew up with it. You know, like my grandfather, he talk about love, and he would say something like, "You know, the wind shows its body through trembling leaves." It's something that you have to think about it.

MS. TIPPETT: Would you be able to find something that you love, some piece of poetry or some lines, in either of these books?

MS. MIN: Yes. I like the one in *Empress Orchid*. This paragraph means a lot to me because I think I have experienced a departure, and departure with the family, especially with my mother, and I think the departure of when I was sent to the labor camp. You know, when I departed from the labor camp and leaving all my loved ones behind knowing that they would have no future. And also, departure from China to America, and knowing that I don't know my future. I might not make it here.

And also, the departure that I feel, you talking about the moment of making of choice, and that sometimes I don't look up at myself. Because when I learned that my brother and my sister were rejected by American visas, and the American Consulate says that the only chance that they can come to America to study is to have me go back, to exchange, which means I would go back to China for good, and I was not able to quit, you know, what I had achieved here. And that was a very selfish act. And after I made that decision, then I talked to my father. I said, "I couldn't live with it." So I told my father that I want to come and to let my sister have the chance. And my father says, "No way, because you come home that doesn't mean that they will get the visa, and that you will lose your visa for good. And my biggest fear is if China were to ever have a conflict with America, you will be the first person to be denounced as American spy." So, I ended up staying here. But that departure was always there.

And then the final departure, that my mother passed away. And when I was writing *Empress Orchid*, and this come to me. So I'm going to read this to you, the departure where *Empress Orchid* entered the Forbidden City.

(Reading) "Outside the gate the horses had begun to move. Bannermen carried the dragon flags and yellow umbrellas. Among them were lady riders dressed in 16th-century Manchu warrior costumes. Hanging from the sides of their mounts were yellow ribbons tied to cooking ware. Behind the ladies was a flock of animals dyed red. They seemed like a rolling river of blood. When I looked again, I saw sheep and geese. It was said that these animals symbolized fortune well kept, and the red, the passion for life.

"I let down the curtain to hide my tears. I was preparing myself to not see my family for a long time. 'This was what mother wanted,' I convinced myself. A poem she read to me when I was little came to mind: "Like a singing river, you break out to flow freely. I am the mountain behind. Happily I watch you, memory of us full and sweet.

"My memories were full and sweet, indeed. They were all I had, and I was taking them with me. As soon as I felt that the palanquin was moving steadily, I opened a slit in the back curtain and looked out. My family was no longer in sight. Dust and ceremonial guards blocked my view. Suddenly, I saw my brother Kuei Hsiang. He was still on all fours with his head glued to the ground. My heart betrayed me, and I cracked like a Chinese flute broken in the middle of its happy playing."

MS. TIPPETT: I think this is so much about, you know, the human spirit. And I think your story is so much about, you know, as you say, your passion for life, somehow about surviving everything.

MS. MIN: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: All right. Thank you so much.

MS. MIN: Thank you.

MS. TIPPETT: Before we left her house outside San Francisco, Anchee Min played us a song on her piano. Growing up in China, she told us, owning a piano was one of her wildest fantasies, a dream she never believed would come true. At 40 she took lessons. She asked if she could play us a song called "My Motherland." In *Red Azalea* it recurs as a kind of theme song, sometimes tragic and off key in the story she tells about Mao's China.

MS. MIN: It's about how beautiful my country is, the great river, the great mountains. And we would not allow the invaders to take it away from us. We're going to fight till we die to protect our beautiful country. Ready, set, go.

(Anchee Min plays "My Motherland")

MS. TIPPETT: Anchee Min's most recent book is *Empress Orchid*.

At speakingoffaith.org view an image gallery of Communist propaganda posters from the Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong. Listen to this program again and hear others in our archives, download a MP3 to your desk top, subscribe to our podcast, and sign up for our e-

mail news letter, which brings my journal on each week's topic straight to your desktop. That's speakingoffaith.org.

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