

## Anchee Min

Anchee Min (b. 1957) was born in Shanghai, China, during the Cultural Revolution of Mao Tse Tung. Her parents were teachers who took laboring jobs after being accused by the Communist government of being “bourgeois intellectuals.” Min was sent by the government to work in rural areas, and she worked for a film production company before becoming a writer. She emigrated to the United States to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. She has written six novels, including a historical novel on the life of Madame Mao in 2001. Her memoir *Red Azalea* was a *New York Times* notable book in 1994.

### Footprints on the Flag

I arrived in America in 1984 and attended The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I worked as a gallery attendant. During the 1987 art exhibition, one of the pieces was an American flag laid flat on the floor. About three feet above, mounted from the wall, was the artist's diary. I noticed that the viewers had to step on the flag in order to read the diary. As a result, the flag started to have footprints on it. I thought that I had neglected my duty, so each time after a viewer left I would take off my jacket and wipe the flag clean. I kept thinking if someone did this to our national flag in China, he would have been prosecuted.

I became sick of cleaning the flag. Eventually when a viewer came I would go up to him or her and would say politely, “Please do not step on the flag.”

Weeks later the artist came. He was displeased that there were not enough footprints on the flag. He explained that it was his intention to have people step on the flag.

What offended me more was that the artist planned to burn the flag in public when the show ended. I understood that I had no right to stop him. I was emotional because if it were not for America I would not have been alive today. America took me in after I denounced the Communist China.

When the artist's admirers told me to get my English straight so that I could have the “right understanding of this evil country,” I wished that I could sound out the words that were boiling inside my head. “Twenty years earlier I had done exactly what you are doing now!” As a child, I was taught

to hate Americans. “Long Live Chairman Mao”<sup>o</sup> was the first phrase I learned to write before my own name. I not only burnt American flags, but also denounced my beloved teacher as an American spy in order to demonstrate my loyalty toward the Communist Party. As a teen, I was given a gun with a knife to practice stabbing a straw dummy wearing a U.S. soldier's uniform. My schoolmates and I watched propaganda films, where American soldiers were shown scooping out the eyes of a young Viet Cong, a girl of my own age.

I was ready to die for my country if Americans dared to set their foot on the soil of China. I couldn't wait to be sent to Vietnam to become a martyr. I wanted to model myself after the hero who tied grenades on his back and jumped into a group of U.S. Marines, blowing them up as well as himself. I dreamed of my remains being shipped back to the homeland wrapped in the Communist red flag—my family and friends sad, but proud.

The American artist protested that he lacked freedom. In my view, he had too much. He took America for granted. If he had been in China twenty years ago, I would have taught him a good lesson.

[2007]

*Chairman Mao: Mao Zedong (1893–1976), communist revolutionary and leader of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1976*