

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. For the past nine years, book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington D.C. celebrate reading at the Library of Congresses National Book Festival. This year, the library is proud to commemorate a decade of words and wonder at the 10th Annual National Book Festival on September 25, 2010. President and Mrs. Obama are honorary chairs of the event, which provides D.C. locals and visitors from across the country and around the world the opportunity to see and meet their favorite authors, illustrators, poets and characters. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will be held between 3rd and 7th streets on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. rain or shine. It's now my pleasure to welcome the best selling memoirist and novelist, Anchee Min. She's with us today to talk about her latest book, Pearl of China, which she will speak about when she appears at the National Book Festival. In addition to being an acclaimed author, she has a compelling life story to tell. Born as a citizen of communist China, she was sent to a labor camp at the age of 17. She worked there for three years under extreme conditions and while doing so, was discovered by government talent scouts and placed as the leading actress in a propaganda film. Unfortunately, as a result of her role in this film, Anchee became labeled a political outcast and suffered constant humiliation until her move to America in 1984. Thank you so much for joining us. Anchee, as I said, you have a very compelling life story to share. What was it like coming through such hardships in China and what were some of the challenges you faced adjusting to a different country and culture?

>> Well, I didn't speak English and I was almost -- I was almost -- I got caught at customs coming through and was so afraid because, you know, in that room -- they put me in a room that where people get deported because, you know, I came to study in the university, but didn't speak English. I applied as an art student because that was my only choice and then I begged for a chance to speak, to learn, just begged for a chance to let me learn English for three months and I told them, if I didn't manage to learn English, I would deport myself, because that was the language and also, I had no money to make a living here. So I got a chance to be a real immigrant and got a chance to start from the bottom and become just very blessed. And I got to do everything.

>> Yes. Now, the experience that you had as a young person, how did that change your views of the government and the leadership in China?

>> I guess we were very ideal. We were taught that we were born to serve the people with heart and soul, to save the -- for me, as a youngster, the goal was to save starving children, especially young children living in America. And I came and to find that the people here are not starving. Poor people. That was the first thing that shocked me was that, you know, American poor people. I'm sorry. I was sad. I expected them to be in rags [Inaudible]. But we were disillusioned at the labor camp because we were growing [Inaudible] to fight the Americans in Vietnam, but we could hardly even feed ourselves. So after Mao died in 1976, and two months later, Madame Mao was overthrown and the regime changed. Chinese people were ready because we knew the system was not working. So I think it really, the experience prepared all Chinese to be politically mature. For

the next 10 years, China soared economically and it's just that it's the people as well. The people were ready for the change.

>> Now, as I said, you came to America in 1984 and it wasn't until after then that you became a writer. At what point did you decide that that's what you wanted to do, that you had a story to tell?

>> Well, I couldn't get -- I was working in the restaurants and working construction and I tried to get a job as a secretary, but I couldn't type and my English wasn't good. And so I was taking very beginning classes in English and my teacher says oh, you are such a lousy writer, but you have a wonderful story. So I thought, hmm, fresh start to, you know, look for. I asked the teacher, I said what do you think of who is a good writer? And he turned around and gave me his book. I read it and I thought, hmm, I could do that.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Well, if he gave me Virginia Woolf's book, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to try.

>> Mm-hmm. Now, on your website, you credit the English language as giving you a means to express yourself. What is the difference? I mean, why is it more difficult in Chinese and why did you find that in English?

>> Because I was brainwashed. When I was going through my pre-school years, I was taught to write I love you [Inaudible] Mao before my own name. So I didn't have the language in Chinese to express myself at the time, which is about 25 years ago in 1984. I didn't have that language that is human. I had slogan shouting languages in Chinese. English, to me, was a music because it allows me to express personal feelings.

>> So it must have been a liberating experience, I guess, to find out that that really wasn't the purpose of the English language. Hmm?

>> Right.

>> Yeah. Now, I know you've told this story before, but I found it interesting how you actually came to learn English. Tell me about that if you would.

>> Well, I -- it's a necessity for me to stay in America. I was looking for a job. I got rejected. I walked around in Chicago, the city of Chicago, on Michigan Avenue and everywhere where my legs could carry me. But the first thing, when they saw me -- I knocked on doors in Chinese restaurants and they say, do you have the experience and do you speak English? And I didn't. So I was very much envied the whole [Inaudible] people because I thought they had not only the right to work and they had the right, and that they spoke English, but I was determined. So I was thrilled the first time I, in a restaurant, and I spoke. I said, may I take your order and the other person, the customer understood. And I was so very happy. But, you know, when it comes down to take orders and I just I couldn't read the, actually, the item on the menu so I just asked them to point. And when they point, I remember the number, you know, the

fish number, for example, orange chicken and its number 8. And then they say fried rice and I look at the number 19. So I would just write the number and then went to the kitchen and then translate that number into Chinese and English.

>> Now, I understand you picked up a lot of English from television as well. Is that correct?

>> Oh, yes, from Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and Oprah Winfrey.

>> Well, I learned a lot from at least those first two as well, so I guess we have something in common there. Your first book, Red Azalea, talks about your own childhood in China. Was it difficult to go back and revisit some of those memories?

>> Yes. It was very difficult, but that was the only thing that I knew. And also, it was my way of studying English. I figured if I write it and then had people come and correct me, so my English -- it was on my mind just to practice, to learn English for using these stories, and that was the, you know, the life I had. It was, again, later on it gets pretty bad because, you know, I went through the cultural shock because I was alone here without knowing anybody. And it was kind of -- I knew I had a one-way ticket come here and I couldn't see my family, my parents, and I didn't have the money to call them and so the only thing with me was my memory.

>> Some authors talk about when they write a story that's personal, that it's kind of a cathartic experience, that they're able to work through some of, maybe some of the difficult feelings or bad memories that they had. Did you find that as well?

>> Yes. The hardest thing actually was to write down the truth because, you know, in memoirs normally you end up with yourself looking either the victim or you don't look evil. But after I went through the first draft, I found myself as just the victim, but actually, I participated in this through the cultural revolution. And we people of China, we were water. We carried the communist boat. So everybody, I feel that I was responsible. Although, it wasn't up to me, you know, the things that we did that caused the disaster of the cultural revolution, but I still feel I was a part of it. I should be responsible. So, I re-wrote the whole thing and honestly described the part of the things that wasn't that glorious, wasn't that, you know, didn't make me look good. That was the victory, I would think.

>> Your third book, you mentioned Madame Mao earlier. Third book is Becoming Madame Mao, which is a story about the life of Jiang Qing, who, of course, was the wife of Mao Zedong. It's been classified as historical fiction, but I understand that all of the characters in the book actually existed at one time. How much of it was fiction? How much of it was historical?

>> Well, about 95% is historical, 5% of it is -- I wouldn't even say fiction. It was just my own view, I would say.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> It was convenient because after I was denounced as Madame Mao's trash because her talent scout handpicked me to -- well, I was pulling weeds in cotton fields and they picked me to the Shanghai film studio to play the movie, a propaganda movie to portray Madame Mao's ideal woman. And after Madame Mao was overthrown, I was disgraced. So I was put there to listen to those victims who came out of the jail to talk about their suffering. So their stories about why they were punished by Madame Mao, their personal relationship with Madame Mao. So, as a result, I learned first-hand all these stories and lots of people, those people, they died after two or three years. So I knew all the stories. So I thought, why don't I just use Madame Mao as the subject to show all that I knew?

>> How much research did you have to put into that and what was your process?

>> Research -- I put a lot of research. Basically it's a cross examination. It's an investigative. Because I just wanted to know what I knew was correct. It wasn't difficult because it was like from Chinese and English and from a Chinese historian's point of view and the American and the foreign investigative historian's point of view, and I just make sure everything was right. The only difficult part was to describe Madame Mao's relationship with her daughter because her daughter had to choose between going with her dad, Mao, who today, is still considered George Washington of China. While the mother was considered responsible for all the bad things the dad did. And the mother was sentenced to death and as people's enemy and she committed suicide. Today, she is still considered, you know, the bad person. But the mother shouted on national TV when she was sentenced to death, the moment, and she shouted, she says I am Mao's dog. My husband asked me to bite. I bit. There was a very accurate portrait. But the daughter-mother relationship I did not know. I kind of imagined it and so I was very nervous when the book by Madame Mao's personal secretary came out describing the relationship. I was opening up the pages, I was hoping, you know, nothing was wrong. But nothing was against, you know, what I portrayed. And to my great, great fortune, it was almost as, you know, exact, the mirror image of what I described in the book. I was very relieved.

>> What did you hope to accomplish in telling Madame Mao's story?

>> Well, I wanted to give my readers, especially American readers, the portrayal, the history of China. Because, I feel as American citizens, that we, it's important for us to know where China is going and then so we can work with that in terms of development of American future. The only way we knew where China was coming from, we would know where China -- we'll be able to predict where China is going. So I feel that that, by offering historical books on China to American readers, and especially young readers, that would be a part of a contribution, my contribution, to this country for being given the opportunity to live here and survive. And it was the best gift and I feel like, you know, so much was given to me and so much should be expected of me and when my book became best seller, it was very great comfort.

>> Let's talk a little bit about your newest book, which I mentioned earlier, Pearl of China. It's the story that's based on the life of American novelist, Pearl S. Buck, who of course won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934 and lived most of her life or much of her life, I should say, in China. Your novel tells the fictional story of a life-long friendship, between her and the Chinese girl named Willow. What moved you to write this story?

>> I was ordered to denounce Pearl S. Buck at the age of 14. I was in the Shanghai Middle School and I did not know Madame Mao was trying to reject Pearl Buck's visit to China. She was supposed to accompany President Nixon in 1972. And, in order to come up with a reason to reject Pearl Buck, Madame Mao named her as a cultural imperialist. And so it was a kind of national campaign. I was, and every children in the school, was taught to denounce Pearl S. Buck, and I was not given the opportunity to read The Good Earth, her work which won the Nobel Prize. I was just told to copy the newspapers so I was told that Pearl Buck -- in her book, she portrayed, she insulted the Chinese peasants and therefore, she insulted China. Therefore she was termed the enemy. That was all I knew. I did not know that Madame Mao wanted to be standing in between Mao and Nixon. And she would never let Pearl Buck have that chance. So, after I came to America, one day I was in the bookstore in Chicago and was giving a reading of Red Azalea and afterwards, a person came to me. She asked me, do you know Pearl S. Buck? And before I could say anything, she said you know, it was Pearl S. Buck who taught me to love Chinese people, and then she gave me a book on The Good Earth. And I read it. I just woke up. You know? I did not expect it that in the book was full of so much love for the Chinese people and so much humanity. So it was that moment, the book, Pearl of China was born, the idea was born.

>> The Good Earth, of course, was the novel that Pearl S. Buck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for. It's also been said that it accurately describes the brutal conditions of peasant life in China. Does it -- how would you characterize that? Is it kind of a balance between the brutality and also the optimism, I guess, of the peasants?

>> Yes, very, very much so. I think she got the core of what the character of Chinese peasants. Part of my childhood was spent in [Inaudible], which is in province of [Inaudible], which is same province where Pearl Buck grew up. She lived in a village called [Inaudible], which is about an hour and a half driving distance from where I lived. We both lived by the branch of [Inaudible] river. In front of my grandmother's house, I was born in Shanghai, but every year I went to my grandmother's house and in the river, the branch, the [Inaudible] river, where I washed my dishes, my clothes, my [Inaudible] and I would swim and I would play with the boat people's children. And I describe [Inaudible] conditions with [Inaudible] in Pearl Buck's novel she described that the Chinese peasants, in rainy season, the floor swelled and the water will turn the floor into liquid mud. That was my floor. So I could identify with the story. And also, my grandmother, she had a bad feet, and the story she told me was very much like Pearl Buck's. And also in me and my grandmother, you saw that we were, you know, there is a positive side. You know? We're not just sulking misery. We always -- I think the fact

that I survive in America is this positive, sunny side in the peasant's character Pearl Buck described, you know, the peasant character. And we love, you know, the language Pearl Buck spoke of in the novel was really a wonderful, colorful, something that I admire as a wonderful author. She was just a treasure and I'm so glad that Americans recognized that.

>> Have you been back to China since you moved to America?

>> Yes. Yes, as long as my books are not translated in Chinese. I had 33 different languages except Chinese, so as long as I don't push to do that, I don't bother the Chinese government and they let me in and out freely. And I had to do that because my father still lives in China. My mother passed away and, but this time is different. They actually, they liked -- the Chinese government reviewed Pearl of China. They felt that I did a positive, well-balanced view and also, I think, also the Chinese knew [Inaudible], the young people in the leadership, now they can see that I don't have to -- I should not, it should not be, everything about China in the book has to be 100% positive. It's not just human. You can't tell a human story and not everything. You know, the Chinese government is a very oversensitive, I would say, I would say about, you know, my portrayal of the cultural revolution, about my other book. It takes time. I think that, you know, they are making the first baby steps about accepting Pearl of China. Although, you know, still, they did not say that they would welcome a Chinese translation, but at least they reviewed, they gave positive review in the news, in the Chinese official news. So that's a good sign.

>> What kind of feelings did you have going back there? Was it difficult?

>> No. It's not difficult. I step on the Chinese floor. I'm Chinese. You know? I stand in the lines and sight see and I got yelled at by the, you know, the, what we call [Inaudible] -- means highway street patrol. They said, go back and I thought, yes, by people because it's too crowded. My American born daughter, on the other hand, she's not used to it. With so many umbrellas on the street during the raining season, it just pokes her face and as an American you are used to, you know, distance, keep distance when you're walking with others. In China, you know, she understood the one-child policy because China could not afford to have more population because as is, it's awful. There is no place in the subway, even during weekends. It's like tin can. So we give the Chinese government quick credit regulating and doing good job and feeding, you know, it could be starving people. It could be chaos. It could go there. You see the conditions. It's very hard to manage.

>> Anchee Min, thank you so much for taking out the time to talk with me today.

>> Thanks for having me.

>> And, of course we look forward to seeing you at the National Book Festival. You'll be in the Fiction and Mystery Pavilion. That's September 25, 2010 from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on the National Mall in Washington D.C. As always, free and open to the public and it is rain or shine, so we hope it's a nice day. The book, once again, Pearl of China. Anchee

Min, thank you so much. This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Thank you for listening.