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Best-selling Gen X novelist Mian Mian exposes youth drug culture in changing China

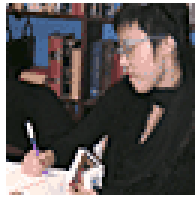
[by Anna-Sophie Loewenberg, special to SF Gate](#)

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In keeping with her reputation as the enfant terrible of Chinese letters, Mian Mian, an ex-drug addict turned dance-party producer, strode into the Commonwealth Club last Friday night wearing black bondage boots and immediately wanted to light up.

"Why can't you smoke anywhere in this f**ing America?" the 33-year-old author of the best-selling novel "Candy" exclaimed before speeding out the door for a prereading cigarette.

Dubbed China's "poster child for spiritual pollution" by Chinese censors, who banned "Candy" in 2000, the novel is loosely based on Mian's own life as a teenage drug addict on the streets of Shenzhen and Shanghai. It was also the first work of fiction by a female author to expose China's underground of

drugs, promiscuity and rock music.

Giving voice to the decadent youth of China who are growing up in the world's fastest-growing economy, her novel is personal, feminine and full of teenage disillusionment. Although much of the story unfolds inside the prostitution rings and rock bars of what Mian calls China's "bulls** Special Economic Zones," she maintained that her book has nothing to do with politics: "The Cultural Revolution is out of my dictionary," she said.

Mian was 24 and just out of rehab when she began writing "Candy" in the mid-'90s. Since then, she has become a literary icon for an entire generation of Chinese and has gained an international reputation. The International Herald Tribune called Mian "perhaps China's most promising young writer." She has also quit popping pills and has had a child of her own.

Describing her beloved Shanghai as "a beautiful bitch who loves money," Mian is now globe-trotting to promote her book in translation. "I come to America, I come to France, I come to Portugal, I come to many countries just to have a party, so what do you expect?" the author blurted out at the Commonwealth Club while drinking her wine.

The day after the reading, I met Mian in the Haight for a San Francisco shopping spree. Dressed in white thigh-high boots and a faux-fur coat, she caught the eye of even the most outrageous slackers, who bummed her French cigarettes while she searched for vintage Doors vinyl. With a microphone hanging

out of her own purse, Mian said she was working on her next "life diary." So I followed her around the Haight to find out how a Chinese ex-heroin addict writes a novel, and how fame and motherhood have changed things for the Queen of the Shanghai Underworld.

What inspired you to write "Candy"?

I started to write this book 10 years ago. At that time, I was really hopeless. I didn't know what I should do. I was just out of my drug problem, so I rented videos. Most of the movies were from America, Hollywood movies. So I said, "OK, I can write a story."

**How long did it take to write the book?
What was your writing process like?**

I spent five years writing this book. The first two years, I stayed with my parents, because my parents just think, "OK, you can write. You don't need to work." So I was really lucky that they supported me, even though I'm a trouble girl. They never expected that I can be famous like [I am] today.

So, the last three years, I lived in the countryside on my own, far away from downtown, about an hour-and-a-half drive. The area was empty, and it was only me living there. So I wrote every night and every morning. At 4 am, I felt a lot of strange energy [coming] from out of my window -- it [came] to me.

Have you always been a writer?

It was when I was 17 that I had first started to write. I thought, "This is the only thing I can pick up. I can do it by myself. I don't need anyone to help me."

Why do you think people in America will want to read "Candy"?

The story is quite normal. I think that every country has this kind of book in their history. In America, maybe it was in the 1960s. In China, it happened really late, in 2000.

My book has been published around the world, and the reason is that people want to know about the new China. They want to know about Chinese people. Also, it's because this book talks about love. It is quite teenage, very confused. I think people like this book not only because I come from China but also because this book is about love.

"Candy" was the first novel in China that exposed the underworld of sex, drugs and relationships from a female perspective. Were you writing this book for other women?

When I wrote this book, I never thought about who I was writing it for, because I was just writing for myself. But I never imagined that so many young women would like my book. Even for foreign women who read my book, it's not just because I'm writing about China, but it's because I'm writing about so many things that are inside of our hearts, interesting

stuff. It's teenage stuff. A lot of women have written me letters.

The Chinese government banned Candy in 2000, and that helped make it an underground best-seller. Did they ban the book because you were a woman writing so candidly about sex?

I don't think it had to do with the fact that I'm a woman. I think it was because the book became so popular that all of the newspapers started writing about sex and drugs. These topics hadn't been exposed this much before, so the government had to put a stop to that. But the government couldn't make the media stop talking about the book, so they banned the book.

This is your first time in America. How do you like it so far?

I don't really understand America, because it is huge, and I'm too busy promoting my book to really hang out and party. But I think America is really fun, and it has a youthful feeling. Europe has an older feeling, so it's not as fun as America.

How did you find your English translator, Andrea Lingenfelter, and what do you think of the translation?

She found me. I think that my translator really did a great job. Because sometimes, if I'm drunk, or I want to go to sleep, I pick up the book and read, because [English] is the only language I can read in

translation. I can't read German, Italian or French. So, if I don't want to read a serious work, sometimes I pick up this book. And, almost every time, I want to cry. I think the language is really beautiful.

What most inspired you when you were writing "Candy"?

Definitely music. There are so many bands that I like. The Doors is the band that has most inspired my writing, because of the feeling of their music. Also, P.J. Harvey inspires me. As for Chinese musicians, it would have to be Cui Jian. I like Wang Shuo's books in Chinese, but I wasn't reading many books.

You started writing "Candy" when you were 24 years old. Since then, you have had a child. How have you changed?

Of course, having a child has changed my life. Having a baby has changed my body, my health, as a woman. Having a baby, you have to take care of yourself, and you have to change your style, your clothes, because you're a mother. Now that I have a child, my attitude toward the world is much more tolerant.

Also, I broke up with my baby's father, and he took the baby, so our battle over the baby has really changed me.

Do you ever see your daughter?

I often go to Beijing to see them.

How has the Shanghai music scene you

wrote about changed?

I think the change is that DJ parties have become more popular -- more people know about the dance scene -- so the police come and drug bust the parties. It's not like it used to be, very underground. If you carried pills, nobody knew you had them, and if you took pills, there wasn't any problem. Now, the police are really busting people.

But I think the fact that young people are going to clubs, and just enjoying themselves, is a huge improvement for China.

Anyway, now, a lot of people don't use drugs at the parties, but they have fun. I don't use drugs anymore. Ecstasy has nothing to do with my life now. I think that people are always growing up and maturing. Drugs aren't attractive to me anymore, because I have so many other things to do with my life now. Drugs are really boring.

Now, you promote your own parties. Is it true that you actually threw a rave on the Great Wall of China?

We threw an insane party on the Great Wall. That was last year, during SARS, in April. So it was really scary. The first night, we threw a party in downtown Beijing, 1,500 people dancing with face masks on -- really scary. The next day, we put on our face masks, with the No. 1 DJ in the world, Paul Oakenfold, and we went climbing up the Great Wall. Wow! That was the best party ever, because this

British DJ, Paul Oakenfold, was the only one who didn't delay his trip. Nobody was willing to come to China during that time. Only insane people would come to China to party. Shanghai and Beijing were completely empty, but he came.

Also, every time I throw a party, it rains. That night, there were five hours of rain. We danced in the rain for hours. So, everyone at that party was a lunatic. It was incredibly cold. My expensive jacket and bag and boots were all ruined. I think that vodka really works. I think it was the best party I've ever promoted in my life.

How can you throw a party like this in China? Weren't you afraid that the government was going to shut you down?

It wasn't illegal. We were working with the local government. But it's really hard to throw parties in China, because, if you want to be the queen of the party scene, you have to make peace everywhere. It's not like you, in America, might imagine: This week, a party; next week, a party. It takes a lot of planning. Even for a small party, you need a lot of legal papers. You need a sponsor, and a working visa for the foreign DJ. Everyone thinks that I make a lot of money from throwing parties, but it has become really hard to make money. It's a lot easier for me to make money with my writing.

How about your new book, "Panda Sex"?

I worked three years on my new book, which will be published in March. My new book also talks about

love, but it's not like a teenager -- it's more mature. So, now, I've already grown up from ["Candy"].

You focus on sexuality and relationships in your novels. What kind of men are you attracted to?

I like international men. I like part man, part woman, part strong, part delicate. I like someone with really mixed blood. Every man is different. Of course, I like soft, shiny Asian skin.

Are you working on your next novel?

It took me three years to write "Panda Sex." From now on, I don't need to spend three years writing a book. Now, I can put out a book every month. I'm still a writer, I can still write a book, but now I'm recording everything, and someone will help me type the recordings, and then I'll put it together, and I'll write my name. This is my book. I think it's more interesting. [It's] better just [to] do it in one or two years. I think it should be a little easier. I don't have to be so tired. Three years writing one book, that's f**ed up -- that's exhausting! So, I'm going to try it this way. I think people will love to read this. The lower you write, the more people love to read it. Our conversations, driving, stopping -- I'll record everything. People are really going to like it.

Mian Mian is speaking as part of Stanford University's free Winter Colloquium Series, "Globalizing Asian Cultures." "A Walk on the Wild Side with Shanghai Gen X Writer Mian Mian" will be held Wednesday, Jan. 28, 4:15 pm-5:45 pm in the

Philippines Conference Room, Encina Hall, Stanford University.

"Candy," by Mian Mian (Back Bay Books, 2003).

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Mian and Sufi's proposal to shift much of the risk of falling home prices to lenders "while rewarding them for their trouble" is a good place to start. If we don't put moralizing aside and analyze dispassionately what caused the last crisis, we are unlikely to prevent the next one. • Wall Street Journal. "Subsequent reforms to our financial system give policymakers more tools to police housing finance, yet the continuing over-reliance on debt and a lack of good jobs leaves families at risk and exposes our economy to the whipsaw of another debt-fueled credit bubble." Rarely do economists step back and look at the foundational problems in the system that if solved would change the world. Even more rare is an effective and viable solution. Read more. Yunnan Baiyao is a well known Chinese medicine used to stop bleeding and promote healing from wounds or internal injuries. 4 g (250 mg x 16 cap) Item #: AH175C. \$13.98. 10 or more: \$11.98. Sleeppeace (Te Xiao Zao Ren An Mian Pian). Guang Ci Tang Chinese Medicine. Have a poor sleep? La mian, which means "pulled noodles," is one of the most popular dishes across China. The dish originates in the western Chinese city of Lanzhou, once a major stop along the Silk Road. Thanks to the city's positioning, it has a large Muslim population and influence, and with it, endless options for halal food. Essentially, anyone eating halal can be guaranteed safe, high-quality, well-cut meat, something that more and more consumers are looking for in China. Noodles being pulled | © michael davis-burchat / Flickr. So where does la mian come in? La mian is not just the hand-pulled noodles suggested by the name, it is also the soup and meat that together with the noodles make up the whole dish.