
CANDY
translated by Andrea Lingenfelter
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"Perhaps China's most promising young writer.... Mian Mian's novel deals with issues – sexuality, drug abuse, China opening to the world – that touch the core of her generation's experience."
International Herald Tribune
a novel by
Mian Mian

CANDY

A NOVEL

MIAN MIAN

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Most of the action in *Candy* is divided between the author's native Shanghai and the enterprising boomtown of Shenzhen, in Guangdong Province. While Mian Mian mentions Shanghai by name, she refers to Shenzhen only as "the South." Once little more than a farming and fishing village on the train line linking Hong Kong and Guangzhou, Shenzhen began its radical transformation in 1980, when Deng Xiaoping, then China's premier, proclaimed it a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Created as a response to the economic stagnation of the Maoist era, the SEZs were integral to Deng's economic reforms. In contrast to the central planning and state-controlled enterprises that characterized the rest of China, the SEZs were set aside as free of state control. The relaxation of state control and the relative freedom soon created a frontier mentality, and many forms of vice

and corruption came to flourish alongside more legitimate private enterprise. Prostitution, drugs, and organized crime, which had been suppressed to a remarkable degree in post-1949 China, thrived in laissez-faire Shenzhen. At the same time, the influx of investment from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West was accompanied by a flood of cultural influences.

The personal and economic freedom represented by Shenzhen was extremely attractive to many young people all over China, and Mian Mian's protagonist, Hong, is no exception. In the rest of China, job seekers waited to be assigned a job by the government, which had the right to send people anywhere in the country. Often, people ended up in jobs hundreds of miles away from their hometowns, but they had little choice in the matter. Qualifications counted for something, but a recent high school or college graduate's display of devotion to the Communist Party was often also a key factor in securing a desirable assignment. In running away to the SEZ to try to make their own way, Hong and others like her were dropping out of this overly constraining system.

What may be remarkable to readers familiar with the last half century of Chinese history is how small a role the Communist Party plays in the lives of the characters who people Mian Mian's book. The omission is telling. The world portrayed in *Candy* is just one more reflection of what Orville Schell, in his lively and insightful book *Mandate of Heaven*, refers to as China's "gray" culture, one devoid of the "redness" that characterized the Communist culture of the first four decades of the People's Republic. "Gray" culture is apolitical on the surface but fascinated with gangsters and other outlaws. Its cynicism, irony, and seeming disengagement from politics have a great deal to say about Chinese society today. Whether it amounts to a loss

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of hope for political change in China or a subtle but effective form of subversion remains to be seen.

A note on currency: The Chinese currency is called the *yuan*. (There are roughly 8.25 *yuan* to the U.S. dollar.) There are ten *mao* (or *jiao*) to each *yuan*, and ten *fen* to each *mao*.

A note on language: Mandarin is the official language of the People's Republic of China. It is used in broadcasting, schools, and other official settings. However, in private life many people are more comfortable using the native dialect of their home region, such as Shanghainese or Cantonese.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I created my own sweetheart, watching him move closer and closer to me. His undying fragility is his undying sweetness and beauty. This book represents some of the tears I couldn't cry, some of the terror behind my smiling eyes. This book exists because one morning as the sun was coming up I told myself that I had to swallow up all of the fear and garbage around me, and once it was inside me I had to transform it all into candy. Because I know you will be able to love me for it.

CANDY

A

Why did my father always have to push me in front of the Mona Lisa? And why did he always make me listen to classical music? I suppose it was just my fate, for want of a better word. I was twenty-seven years old before I finally got the courage to ask my father these questions — up until then, I couldn't even bring myself to utter the woman's name, I was so terrified of her.

My father answered that Chopin was good music. So when I was bawling my head off, he would shut me in a room all by myself and have me listen to Chopin. In those days none of our neighbors had a record player or a television the way we did. What's more, many of them were forced to subsist on the vegetable scraps they scrounged at the market, since meat, cloth, oil, and other basics were still being rationed. My father thought that as a member of

the only "intellectual," or educated, family in our entire apartment building, I should feel fortunate.

Father said that it had never occurred to him that I might be afraid of that print hanging on our wall. Why didn't I just look at the world map that was hanging right next to it? Or the map of China? Or my own drawings? Why did I have to look at that picture? At length he asked, Anyway, why were you so afraid of her?

Many other people have asked me this very question, and each time someone asks, I feel that much less terrified. Still, it's a question I can't answer. Just as I can't explain why, from the time I was a very small child and barely able to talk, my father would have chosen to deal with my crying the way he did.

I have never actually taken a good close look at that woman (I'm far too afraid of her to attempt that). Nonetheless, my most powerful childhood memories are of her portrait.

As I grew older, certain ideas became fixed in my mind. Her eyes were like a car crash at the moment of impact; her nose was an order issuing from the darkness, like a ramrod-straight ladder; the corners of her mouth were cataclysmic whirlpools. She seemed to have no bones except for her brow bones, and those bald brows were an ever-present mockery. Her clothing was like an umbrella so massive that it threatened to steal me away. And then there were her cheeks and fingers. There was no denying that they resembled more than anything the decaying pieces of a corpse.

She was a dangerous woman. And I was often in this dangerous presence. I had very few fears, but she terrified me. In middle school history class, I was once startled to look up and find myself face-to-face with a slide projection of this painting. My throat tightened, and I cried out in shock. My teacher reacted by conclud-

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ing that I was a bad student and making me stand up as punishment. Then he took me to see the assistant principal, who gave me a stern lecture. At one point they went so far as to accuse me of reading "pornography," like the then-popular underground book *The Heart of a Young Girl.*

That was the beginning of my hatred for the man who had painted her. And I started to despise as well all those who called themselves "intellectuals." My hatred had a kind of purity about it — I would open my heart and feel a convulsive anger pulsing in my blood. I named this sensation "loathing."

My unalloyed fear of this painting stripped away any sense of closeness I might have felt toward my parents. And it convinced me, all too soon, that the world was unknowable and incomprehensible.

Later I found the strength to deal with my fear. I found it in the moon and in the moonlight. Sometimes it was in rays of light that resembled moonlight, and sometimes I saw it in eyes or lips that were like moonlight. At other times still it was in the moonlight of a man's back.

B

When it rains I often think of Lingzi. She once told me about a poem that went: "Rain falling in the spring, / Is heaven and earth making love." These lines were a puzzle to us, but Lingzi and I spent a lot of time trying to unravel various problems. We might be trying to figure out germs, or the fear of heights, or even a phrase

like "Love is a fantasy you have while smoking your third cigarette." Lingzi was my high school desk mate, and she had a face like a white sheet of paper. Her pallor was an attitude, a sort of trance.

Those days are still fresh in my mind. I was a melancholy girl who loved to eat chocolate and did poorly in school. I collected candy wrappers, and I would use these, along with boxes that had once contained vials of medicine, to make sunglasses.

Soon after the beginning of our second year of high school, Lingzi's hair started to look uneven, with a short clump here, a longer hank there. There were often scratch marks on her face. Lingzi had always been extremely quiet, but now her serenity had become strange. She told me she was sure that one of the boys in our class was watching her. She said he gave her steamy looks — *steamy* was the word she used, and I remember exactly how she said it. She was constantly being encircled by his gaze, she said. It made her think all kinds of unwholesome, selfish thoughts. She insisted that it was absolutely out of the question for her to let anything distract her from her studies. Lingzi believed that this boy was watching her because she was pretty. This filled her with feelings of shame. Since being pretty was the problem, she had decided to make herself ugly, convinced that this would set her back on the right path. She was sure that if she were ugly, then no one would look at her anymore; and if nobody was looking at her, then she could concentrate on her studies. Lingzi said she had to study hard, since, as all of us knew, the only guarantee of a bright future was to gain admission to a top university.

Throughout the term, Lingzi continued to alter her appearance in all kinds of bizarre ways. People quit speaking to her. In the end most of our classmates avoided her altogether.

As for me, I didn't think that Lingzi had been that pretty to begin with. I felt that I understood her — she was simply too high-strung. Our school was a "key school," and it was fairly common for a student at a school like ours to have a sudden nervous breakdown. Anyway, it wasn't clear to me how I could help Lingzi. She seemed so calm and imperturbable.

Then one day Lingzi didn't come to school. And from then on, her seat remained empty. The rumor was that she had violent tendencies. Her parents had had to tie her up with rope and take her to a mental hospital.

Everyone started saying that Lingzi had "gone crazy." I started eating chocolate with a vengeance, and that was the beginning of my bad habit of bingeing on chocolate whenever I'm anxious or upset. Even today, eleven years later, I haven't been able to break this habit, with the result that I have a very serious blood sugar problem.

I sneaked into the hospital to see her. One Saturday afternoon, wearing a red waterproof sweat suit, I slipped in through the chain-link fence of the mental hospital. In truth, I'm sure I could have used the main entrance. Although it was winter, I brought Lingzi her favorite Baby-Doll brand ice cream, along with some preserved olives and salty dried plums. I sat compulsively eating my chocolates while she ate her ice cream and sweet olives. All of the other patients on the ward were adults. I did most of the talking, and whenever I finished saying something, no matter what the subject was, Lingzi would laugh. Lingzi had a clear, musical laugh, just like bells ringing. But on this day her laughter simply struck me as weird.

What did Lingzi talk about? She kept repeating the same thing

over and over: The drugs they give you in this hospital make you fat. Really, really fat.

Sometime later I heard that Lingzi had left the hospital. Her parents made a series of pleas to the school, asking the teachers to inform everyone that Lingzi was not being allowed any visitors.

One rainy afternoon, the news of Lingzi's death reached our school. People said that her parents had gone out one day, and a boy had taken advantage of their absence. He had brought Lingzi a bouquet of fresh flowers. This was 1986, and there were only two flower stands in all of Shanghai, both newly opened. That night, Lingzi slashed her wrists in the bathroom of her family's apartment. People said that she died standing.

This terrible event hastened my deterioration into a "problem child."

I quit trusting anything that anyone told me. Aside from the food that I put into my mouth, there was nothing I believed in. I had lost faith in everything. I was only sixteen, but my life was over. Fucking over.

Strange days overtook me, and I grew idle. I let myself go, feeling that I had more time on my hands than I knew what to do with. Indolence made my voice increasingly gravelly. I started to explore my body, either in front of the mirror or at my desk. I had no desire to understand it — I only wanted to experience it.

Facing the mirror and looking at myself, I saw my own desire in all its unfamiliarity. When I secretly pressed my sex up against the

cold corner of my desk, I sometimes felt a pleasurable spasm. Just as it had been the first time, my early experiences of this "joy" were often beyond my control.

This was the beginning of my wasted youth. After that winter, Lingzi's lilting laughter would constantly trail behind me, pursuing me as I fled headlong into a boundless darkness.

C

There was only one teacher I liked at my school. She was very young, and tall and slender. She liked to wear dark glasses, and from day to day she always had the same quiet, unhappy air about her. She taught my class just once, and before starting the lesson, she read us a poem, "I Am a Willful Child," by the underground poet Gu Cheng. No teacher had ever done anything like this before. Those ten minutes were the only moment of transcendence of my entire high school career — the spirituality of the teacher's chaste gaze, us listening to the poem, the classroom in the sunlight. A perfect day, a beautiful dream. Over the years, memories of that day have often come back to me, and they have never lost the power to affect me deeply. It was as though I had never been truly moved by anything until that moment.

The term that Lingzi committed suicide I dropped out of school, the only student who had ever left voluntarily. I had set myself free. I was hoping to find some other way to get into university, since I still wanted to go to college someday. But you can't get into college without graduating from high school.

I came to a conclusion: there was too much bullshit in my life. I didn't want anyone to bullshit me anymore, and I wasn't going to bullshit anyone else again either.

After I left school, I was introduced to a black-market booking agent, and that was how I fell into my brief career as a small-time nightclub singer. I love to sing — it gives me a kind of release. I would stand onstage, dressed up in ridiculous 1980s Taiwan-style outfits, making a big show of acting heartbroken. In those days I drew my eyebrows thick and dark, and I liked the plaintive and torchy Taiwan pop singers Su Rui and Wa Wa.

There was a dancer in our band who was even younger than I was. He had a clear gaze and was rather excitable. The two of us were very close and used to hang out together smoking Phoenix cigarettes. He went by the nickname Bug, but he was actually quite large and didn't bear the slightest resemblance to a little bug. Bug was a *niezhai* — a "debt of evil" — the illegitimate child of parents who'd been sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, and he didn't have a real home of his own in Shanghai.

Once, we had to go to Xining to play a few gigs, and this put Bug in especially high spirits. He hopped down the street as if he were performing his own version of the dance aerobics we all used to watch on TV. Bug had grown up in Xining. He loved the dawn in the Northwest. Sunrise there was more luminous than anywhere else, he said.

On the train to Xining, Bug told me story after story about a friend of his in the Northwest. The friend was called Bailian, "white face," like the villains in Chinese operas.

Everything in northwestern China was gray, everything except the sky, which was the bluest blue. I met Bailian, who turned out to

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